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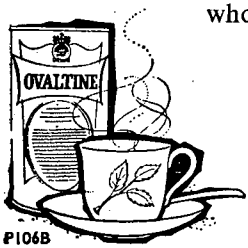

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Bearded, bespectacled William Fifield, born in Chicago, began writing at seventeen ; then came a spell of acting, producing, writing, and directing—including being a musical director, though he admits he is tone deaf ("I got the shows on and off the air on time.") He became a full-time writer, travelled the world from Mexico to Haiti collecting backgrounds, soaking up atmosphere, and now lives near the French village of Van Gogh fame, St.-Rémy-de-Provence. Publications include "The Sign of Taurus" and "The Devil's Marchioness."

LONNIE

BY WILLIAM FIFIELD

THE way I see it, Jack, is that the dame shapes up into what you might call the theme of the thing. Then she meets a guy and it doesn't go so good. And stuff an' stuff an' stuff."

The man driving smiled tiredly and nodded his head. He had scarcely caught more than Hymie's "stuff an' stuff an' stuff," said explosively with shovellings of the two big hands with each repetition. It was what Hymie always said, his way of selling, his way of thrusting the story line into the familiar track of routine and cliché. Hymie was still leaning towards him, his big fleshy lips pulled up in a grin from his large teeth. He was expressing enthusiasm. Before he said, "Well, Jack, it sounds like the right angle to me," the driver knew he was going to say it.

"It may be," he replied quietly.

"You can let me off at the Derby," Hymie said. The driver swung round to the left, off Sunset Boulevard and into Vine Street.

"Thanks for the ride," Hymie went on. "Hard to get a chance to talk to a busy guy like you. How long you expect to be up there?" he asked, as the car slowed to a stop.

"I don't know. A few days."

"Well, get yourself a rest, Jack."

"Thanks. I'll try."

As he pulled out into the traffic of Vine Street again, he glanced into the driving mirror to see if any cars were coming

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behind. As he did so, he glimpsed his face framed against the background of Vine Street and Sunset Boulevard in the distance beyond. There was something exhausted in the areas of skin about his eyes, something subtle but perceptible, not an actual loosening of the skin or darkening beneath the lower lid but a loss of tone. By a kind of instinct, when he had made the turn at Hollywood Boulevard and his hand was free, he reached up and brushed over the thick hair at one temple. The hair was starting to whiten, so that there began to be white wings at either side of his head. Distinguished or darling, his friends began to comment, depending upon their intentions and their sex.

By the time he had reached the inn after the drive of about three hours, messages were already coming in.

" Oh, Mr. Washburn," the receptionist said, " there have been several calls."

He swore silently under his breath, but hardly with any real exasperation. He had made it very clear that he had to have his three or four days—and even before he reached the inn, the place of his hideout was known. Someone had let the secret out. It would have made him hot with anger once, but such things had happened too many times and he was beyond that.

" I shall not be accepting calls," he said. " Say that I am not here, and get them to contact my secretary at the studio."

" Yes, Mr. Washburn," the receptionist said.

He sat down in a light sweater and a pair of gabardine shorts on the little sundeck of his room soon after he had gone upstairs, and tried to graph it out with a pencil. It usually helped to see a story outline actually down on the page, and the holes would appear, and in filling them this or that lead would be suggested. But as he fiddled with the pencil, finally beginning to doodle and sketch with it because no concrete ideas would come, he grew more and more restless. His impatience thrust him to his feet and he began to walk up and down.

For a long time, for months, he had felt the magnet of this story, but when he let go and let himself be drawn, he found that the tug led nowhere. At the bottom of it, he had no more than a sense of what kind of a picture he wanted to make. But he did have a fairly clear idea of the type of girl he wanted for the lead. That much he had; and suddenly turning he went back to his chair and table and began to doodle out a female head.

He couldn't draw and the head he sketched wasn't well formed or defined, but for that matter the girl was only an attitude or a vision. He could try in various ways to bring her to focus—talking with Hymie or probing into himself—and in the end nothing tangible emerged.

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Only one thing did grow clear. He wasn't going to be able to cast the part if he ever did bring his feeling of a girl into some kind of definition. How could he? It wouldn't be that he couldn't find an actress capable of playing the part. But where would he find one who wouldn't bring into his picture all the echoes and overtones of her film life and earlier roles?

In the morning he was no further on. It was cooler than the day before and he put on a jacket before going down to the lake. He had a suspicion he might be playing truant; it even crossed his mind that it might not have been entirely to get free of obligations and the hullabaloo and to concentrate on the picture he meant to make that he had come here to the mountain and the lake. It was certainly true that he felt lighter, picked up and buoyed somehow, just because he was away from the inn and his skeleton of a script, alone, and in the fresh, crisp morning sun.

There was a place where the bank of the lake speared out into a point, a point thickly covered with short pine and low-growing juniper. From a little distance, with the sun at his back, he saw the point plumed over with the green-gold of the plump, short pine. When he went there the trees were clumped or were single and set apart, and there was no undergrowth except the low dark juniper. There was open space on the reddish earth in among the trees and low growth where he could walk more rapidly. The movement enlivened him, and even before he had passed the last of the cover and the cold, fresh wind gusted at him from over the open lake, all the waves capping towards him on the blue surface, he had begun to think that the exhaustion that must have been accumulating in his blood and bones for months was being flushed away.

He saw a place where he could veer off to the left and plunge into what appeared to be a thicket with a stand of woodland beyond it, and on impulse he turned. He burlied his way into the thicket with his shoulders; and he had passed the thicket closure in an instant or two and had found his way on to a lane set deep in between massive pines: a dark, narrow lane, floored with dead needle. And then in only a very few minutes—as he walked on in the expensive shoes and the jacket from Beverly Hills—the hackles had risen on his well-shaven neck like the bristling of an animal.

How could this happen? His attention seemed to keen and tune itself out to every side like a forest animal's ears. And he had heard a sound. It was a sound like a rustling or thumping. Something—someone—was approaching on the path behind him. He forced himself to look round; and the girl was there.

"Hullo," he said. Something of his startledness or the eerie

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feeling must have got into the word and made it a challenge.

She started, and as her head was thrown up nervously he saw her eyes widen. She could not have seen him, or only been dimly aware of him ahead in the green-gold shadow; and then he had turned sharply and barked out at her. Now she stood checked by fright in the path, her head flung up and her eyes dilated, her hands held out a little from her sides as if she would spring away or fend off something.

"I'm sorry," he said quickly. "Hullo—I only meant to say hullo."

This made a slight, uncertain smile flit over her face. He walked towards her.

"Are you one of the summer people?" she asked. There was something tentative and hesitant in her manner. It was still implicit that she might turn and run—fly off into the forest like a startled deer.

"Summer people? Oh, do you mean, am I here on vacation? Well, in a way I am," he said.

He was in command again now and the strange mood induced by the forest was gone. And he spoke in his usual way, a manner that had something lightly ironical and even a little detached and grave about it. If a moment ago, by a strange leap back over time in the influence of the aloneness and the forest, he was almost himself as a youth again, now her youngness made him feel his grave, detached kindness. He was the man who said yes or no to a thousand requests, to a thousand hopefuls . . .

"What is that you have?" he asked, seeing that in one of her hands there was a string of something, a strand of round objects with curved rims, like so many Chinese pagodas hung upside down.

"You don't know?" she asked. Now he thought her eyes were wide with something like incredulity and not with fright. He smiled; her round-eyed expression was like that of the child who cannot believe in the ignorance of the parent.

"No," he laughed, "I don't. You'll have to tell me."

"Mushrooms," she laughed.

"Oh. Well, I am stupid. But I didn't think they were shaped like that. Like this." He made a circle with his thumb and forefinger. "And round over the top like a darning egg."

"That's another kind."

A little later, as they walked side by side, and she kept glancing away from him and into the shadow of the forest floor so that he thought she must be revealing her shyness, he asked her her name.

"Lonnie," she answered.

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"Lonnie? Is that a girl's name?"

"I don't know. Maybe it isn't. You see, my little brother was named Lonnie. I should say my big brother, I guess, but he died before I was born and now that I'm grown up I think of him as little. And his name was Lonnie and so they gave it to me. It must have been because they missed him a lot."

She looked up into his face to see if he would understand this. He nodded. She smiled a little, seeing he did, and then she asked him his name. He almost hesitated to say it, but he did, and she did not seem to know it.

As they walked along, she kept looking down to the side, and then she stopped them by taking his arm.

"See?" she said.

He looked where she pointed and saw nothing.

"No. What's there?" he asked.

She knelt down on the pine needles and not until her hand reached in under the cover of a bush did he see what it was she had noticed as they walked along the path. A mushroom had pushed up beneath the pine-needle carpeting of the forest floor, dislodged it, and could be seen underneath the thatch of matted needle that still covered its top.

"They always grow there," she said, straightening, the mushroom in her hand. With the sharp bit of stick at the end of her mushroom strand she pierced the stalk of the new mushroom, and slid it down the string to hang with the others. "They always grow there in the shadow at the bottoms of the bushes and trees. I put them on the string . . . like this . . . to carry them without breaking their edges."

As they went on she told him the secrets of mushrooming, how to tell the good from the bad, where to look for the pale shapes down in the forest shadow. At first, when her quick eye discovered a new mushroom, he merely watched as she knelt, watched her small form in the checked cotton dress as she bent down, watched the ease with which she kept her balance, crouched on her toes.

But then he was drawn into trying to pick out the forms in the shadow, too. She smiled at him slightly sometimes, as if something funny had happened but she did not want to laugh, when she showed him a mushroom in the very spot where he had been staring and seeing only the bare forest floor. Her ability, and his incompetence, made him feel whimsically rueful.

Twice he bent suddenly and plucked the growth his eye had singled out; she laughed and shook her head; he had picked a toadstool. The edible fungus dipped down in the centre, an indentation that gave the whole top the look of a doughnut, and

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when the under-rim was broken there was a red juice like blood. Nature, as if with malice, had set out toadstools that were exactly the same, except that their juice was white. Lonnie could tell the difference instantly from twenty feet off. He couldn't understand how she knew. The toadstools, far more numerous than the mushrooms, led him on, frustrating him into an unwillingness to give up the hunt. The *next* one would be a mushroom.

After lunch, busy on his script in his room at the inn, he felt the tug to go back again to the out-of-doors. Some freshening, some enlivening, had caught him up, and now he wanted to abandon the futile work on the script and go out and try to regain the mood. He stuck at the script another half-hour, and then he went out.

As he walked into the woods near the inn—and laughed at himself when he found he couldn't keep his eyes from being drawn down to the bottoms of the bushes and trees where he might yet discover his first mushroom—he realised he wanted to find Lonnie. She was mixed up inextricably in his feeling for the woods, in the things that brought the sense of reviving freshness.

And when he saw her ahead of him on the path, as he looked up from that teasing necessity to search out one of the elusive mushrooms, his heart beat foolishly. Suddenly he knew he wanted to see Lonnie for a second and quite different reason. Was it possible to lose your belief that people could like you for yourself because everyone had a special motive?

He started towards Lonnie and the fair head turned, and it was the blonded, fluffed cap of hair of Vera Brawley. His anxiousness to see Lonnie must have betrayed him into mistaking Vera for her.

"Well, Jack!" Vera exclaimed with mock surprise as she came towards him on the path, so that he did not have to wait for her explanation to guess what she was going to say.

"What are you doing here, Vera?" he asked wearily.

"Well, Jack," she said cheerfully, linking his arm familiarly with hers, "I won't lie to you. Hymie tells me you're getting ready to start a picture. Well, darling, will there be a part in it for me?"

He didn't feel anger, only a kind of added tiredness. So Hymie had let the secret out. But nobody was to be condemned because in the dog-eat-dog world actors and their agents lived in, it was fight or starve. He just happened—as the man who made pictures—to be the bone they contended for.

"I'm afraid not, Vera," he said quietly. "I wouldn't offer

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you anything less than a lead. And the lead this time . . ." He tried to tell her what it was he wanted, because he always felt troubled when he had to let someone down, and he wanted her to understand it wasn't because he didn't know her ability. "I may not even use a girl who's been in pictures, you see," he said, thinking aloud. Suddenly he stopped on the path.

"What's the matter?" Vera asked.

"Nothing. Excuse me." He started off. He smiled slightly to himself after twenty or thirty steps. The idea that had occurred to him seemed impossible.

Later on, again in his room, the idea took hold of him and would not let go. "Can I risk a picture with a star who's not even known?" he asked himself. "It's been done, though. But how do I know she can act? She may freeze up and not be able to be her natural self at all." He knew by midnight that arguing it pro and con with himself was useless, because the story and film had begun to form in his mind, and none of it was conceivable without Lonnie.

Even if she had not become a star before the picture was completed, the professional actresses would probably have been acid enough. But even before the picture was finished and could be released, and when she had never been seen on film, Lonnie was already famous. The newspaper writers and gossipists took her up, all of them captivated by her freshness, and she was the one girl for whom a falsely inflated publicity did not have to be pumped up.

The seasoned actresses were cynical enough about it.

"How do you expect us to get along if you start a trend like this?" one of them said to him.

A famous star snubbed him when he came out of his club. "There's the man who's added ten years to my age," he heard her say—loudly for his benefit—to her escort. "Until that child came into the industry, women my age were still leading ladies."

When he saw Vera for the first time since their walk in the woods when he had first thought of hiring Lonnie, she was very ironical.

"Well, Jack, darling, if I had thought you were really serious about wanting an amateur, I would have spared myself the trouble of going up there," she said.

"I wanted someone outside all this." He gestured around him as he spoke. They were in the studio canteen, and at all the tables were actors in make-up, actresses in their expensive street clothes, script writers wearing big black-rimmed glasses that made them look like sallow-faced owls. He could hardly look in

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any direction without being caught by an alert eye—someone who wanted to get his attention, buttonhole him, talk to him about this idea or that role. In the midst of it he sat alone at the executives' table, and Vera had spotted him as she came in.

"Someone on whom none of this would have rubbed off," he went on. "That's why I needed Lonnie. Needed her for myself, too, to help me get back my touch. I was going stale, Vera. I needed somebody who didn't have any ulterior motive, who was from the real world, not this one . . ."

Vera laughed suddenly: a short, bitter explosion. She had been standing beside him, but now she pulled back one of the sacrosanct chairs at the executives' table and plumped down in front of him.

"Jack, you poor boob," she said. "You really think you've caught the real thing, don't you? No ulterior motive. Well, do you want to know something? You want to hear a cute little story? The night we came up there to the lake—you were right, the woods were full of them. Wasn't that what you said after I said Hymie had tipped us off? You said the woods were probably full of us.

"They were. Including Miss Lonnie. Oh, she didn't come up from Hollywood with the rest of us. She got in by the back door. But she got in all right. I wondered where I'd seen her face before when the first stills of her came out in the fan mags. And then I remembered. And I remembered, too, the touching little tale about how Jack Washburn had met his new star in the woods. That was in all the magazines; the writers naturally went for that.

"Well, Jack, none of us wanted to stay in the inn when we went up there to 'happen on to you,' and see if we couldn't get a part in your new picture. Gladys Merritt and I went up together, and we stayed the night in a farmhouse half a mile away. Naturally, Jack, we laid our battle plan, and what did we care if the farmer's family overheard us? The daughter of that family, Jack, was Lonnie."

He sent for Lonnie in the afternoon, and when she came into his office he asked her if it was true.

"Yes, Mr. Washburn," she said. "I heard them talking about the girl you wanted. It sounded like me. And one of the two ladies said she thought she had the appearance you wanted; and that lady looked a little bit like me. So I asked at the inn, and they said you'd gone out. They even tried to tell me you weren't there, but the ladies had said that would probably happen. They said they would have to bump into you accidentally, and so that was what I did too."

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He never wanted—not even on that first day—to send her away. She had had wonderful publicity and had become a name, and anticipation had been whetted for the picture and her first appearance on the screen. He owed it to his company, to the stockholders, to the public, to go ahead and finish the film. And then also he had had the best proof possible that she was a convincing actress. He might doubt his judgment watching a screen test sometimes, wondering if he'd been in Hollywood too long to recognise reality when he saw it, but he had accepted her for what she was in the film—for the woodland Lonnie—that day in the forest. He had believed completely, and had gone on believing until Vera had torn the scales from his eyes.

But something was happening to him, just the same. A great scene of his picture was to be that of the appearance of Lonnie. He had written it straight from life. One of the springs of inspiration that had given him his script had been the fresh feeling of the morning they met, the feeling of rejuvenation, all these things symbolised by the discovery of Lonnie.

Because the picture was being shot out of sequence, the early scene—of Lonnie's appearance—did not come up on the shooting schedule until into the fourth week. That was ten days after Vera's revelation in the canteen. All that day, as they repeatedly shot the scene, he sat like a figure of stone. When a direction had to be given he gave it; otherwise he remained silent, unable to stir himself from a cold, lifeless mood.

While he was watching the takes in the projection room after the day's shooting was over—Lonnie moving before him on the screen, so natural, so fresh, so unspoilt—he thought that he had lost more than he had known in losing Lonnie. He sat alone in the projection room in the dark—alone because the others were isolated from him by the darkness and by his authority. All the decisions were his, and all their various fates hung on his word. He could make the career of this actor, break that technician. And so he had to keep detached, uninvolved, without commitments.

And watching that morning of their meeting reel off before him in its motion picture incarnation he wondered if into his special, sea-calmed loneliness something more than the inspiration of his picture and a new actress had not come the morning he met Lonnie. For once it had seemed to him that someone liked him and was glad to be with him for no reason from the outside, nothing ulterior.

After the takes had been run off, he went up through the darkened building to his office. He made his way to his desk in the banded moonlight that came in through the venetian blinds;

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he sat down, snapped on the lamp, and for three-quarters of an hour went over the script. He was trying to recapture the feelings he had had when he wrote it, the feelings of those days when it seemed that all the vitality and imaginativeness that had brought him to making pictures had come back. Studying through the script, he thought he saw why he had been drawn to make this particular picture. He had not so much been drawn towards the story as thrust to it by his own weariness with the making of pictures.

Been here too long, he thought. "Too long," he said aloud. And as he looked on into the script, he thought he saw something else. Was it accident that the story he'd written was that of a man who found Lonnie and went from loving all she represented to loving her for herself?

He went back down through the building and out to the studio car park. Fog had begun to thread into the valley. He stood waiting for the attendant to bring his car, and then sensed someone near him.

"Lonnie," he said.

She came up slowly, her hands caught together in front of her. Even in the clothes she wore now that she was becoming a star she looked, with her hands clasped in front of her and gazing up earnestly into his face through the faint light, much like the girl he had seen startled and large-eyed on the forest path.

"Lonnie, what are you doing here?" he asked.

"I—I've been waiting for you to come out, Mr. Washburn."

"You want to see me about something, Lonnie? But tomorrow would have done just as well."

"I thought you were displeased today, Mr. Washburn. I thought that maybe it was my fault."

"No, you played the scene well."

"I don't mean because of that."

They were flooded over with brilliant light for an instant, and then the car pulled up beside them. The attendant stepped out from behind the wheel and stood holding the door open.

"Get in, Lonnie. Get in." He opened the door for her, and then went round and slipped in behind the wheel.

"You haven't talked to me hardly at all since the day you had me come to your office," she said. "The day you asked me if I had hunted for you in the woods." They had pulled out into the traffic that streamed along the boulevard—the traffic that would carry them in its flood up from and out of the valley. Shreds of fog flew in the headlights. "It hasn't been the same since then. I don't think you're so happy with the picture, Mr. Washburn."

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"I suppose I thought the picture could be more than it can be."

"I think it's a wonderful picture, Mr. Washburn," Lonnie said naïvely.

"Do you?" He smiled a little. "You know, you oughtn't to say that as the star."

"Oh, I don't mean my part of it. I mean all of it. I've always loved your pictures, Mr. Washburn."

"Have you? I thought I had begun to lose my touch." He smiled a bit grimly.

"Oh no—no!" It was as if the thought physically hurt her.

And then as they went up out of the valley and left the traffic behind them and below, and all the sky and all the city were spread out for them, she began to make him know, by the simplest and naïvest means, what he ought never to have forgotten. He didn't speak as she talked, only listened, staring in front of him, and once or twice turning to look at her. It was as if fifteen years shortened in front of him—the fifteen years he had worked in pictures.

"Oh, you're tired of making pictures," she said, "because it's so complicated. I've seen how complicated it can be. So much detail. And you think that spoils the real thing that you try to say. And it *isn't* just as it was meant when it reaches the screen. But, Mr. Washburn, I wonder if you know what your pictures mean to people. I used to go to them whenever they came out, because you never make anything but pictures about real people and real feelings.

"Oh, I can see how hard it is to realise it here, where it's all just conferences and waiting around for the sets to be ready and everybody trying to get ahead of everybody else, but it means a lot to people to be able to get away from their troubles for a little while and find a kind of hope. Mother and I always went to your pictures even if we had to go without other things to find the money."

"Is your family so poor, Lonnie?" he turned to ask.

"You see, the farm isn't very much. And there's never been a boy, except my brother who died when he was a baby. Now Dad is getting too old to keep up with the work. I help as much as I can, and that was why I wanted to be in the picture. But I didn't think I really had any chance. It was just that we needed the money so badly, and when Miss Brawley and Miss Merritt—" She stopped because he had turned and was looking at her.

She had told him once she was twenty-two. And that was the

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exact age he had been when his hungers—not for food, though he had known that too—had begun to drive him upwards to this lonely position he had attained. Hungers for the larger world that could be created in motion pictures. Fifteen years. What enthusiasm he had had then. And yet it began to seem that fifteen years was not so long.

"So that was the reason you looked for me in the forest," he said with a faint smile.

She nodded, but he hardly noticed. Hardly noticed even though he saw in her face the hope that he would understand why she had had to do it. But he had begun to look beyond even this. Not noticing, he had slowed his driving, and now had to give little attention to the road. He looked out past her to the dazzling city, a far-flung constellation of electric starlight below. For better or worse, he had made that city his, and he in turn belonged to it.

He looked at Lonnie. The city would change her, but she would still be Lonnie. After all, it would only draw her closer to him across the gap of fifteen years. Fifteen years that no longer seemed so long now, that would only grow shorter.

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"Now don't go spilling it all over the place."

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THE TRIVIAL ROUND

It appeared to be all they asked for at Benham St. Mary

BY YOUNGMAN CARTER

THE writing on the card did not say at all what it should have done.

Simpson read it twice to make sure, before looking up across the counter at the man who was holding it out towards him. In the ordinary way of business a traveller's card carries a simple message such as *John Wilkinson, representing Ramsbotham Products Ltd.*
but this one was quite different. It had nothing on it but a number.

Simpson took a long breath before he raised his head. "The war's over," he said. "Finished fifteen years ago. I'm a grocer and I mean to stay that way."

"This is quite important," said the stranger softly. "I wouldn't have come otherwise."

He was a young man with ruffled fair hair and a friendly smile that managed to be nothing but a mask. His mackintosh wind-cheater was nondescript but the oil on it suggested tinkering with motors, and Simpson could see what looked like a very speedy job standing outside the little shop which was now the centre of his world.

Slowly he shook his head.

"It's nothing to do with me any longer. I've retired—just like I told them all at the time. Can I interest you in soapflakes? Special offer this week."

"This is very serious," said the young man in the same even undertone. "And we don't think it's funny to dig you out like this. We know it's naughty, in fact. Could I, please Mr. Simpson, sir, have a word in your office?" More audibly he added, for the vicar was moving down the counter, "It's a rather special line. I'm sure you'll be interested."

A decision was being forced.

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Reluctantly Simpson said, "Well, O.K. Come into the back."

To the girl who was selling sweets in a far corner he added, "Carry on, Beryl, will you? Shan't be half a tick."

The little back room was scented even more strongly than the shop itself: a pleasant mixture of soap, cheese, newsprint, and country herbs. There was barely room for the two men beside the table with its order books and catalogues.

Neither man sat down, for Simpson was in no mind to prolong conversation. He was a grizzled figure, square of jaw and chest, a stranger might have guessed that he was an ex-chief petty officer, though they would have been very wrong.

"Now before you start," he said to the younger man, "let me tell you something. I spent fifteen years in the Department and I had a bucketful of it. When I came out I came out for good and all, and I told the Old Man just that. I meant it."

"But, sir—"

Simpson swept him aside. "Do you know why I came here—why I bought this very shop in this very village? I'll tell you. This is Benham St. Mary—Balmy Benham, they call it. The place where nothing ever happened and nothing is ever going to happen. They like it that way and, by heck, so do I. The road leads nowhere, the parson doesn't quarrel with his parish, we have no trippers, no ghosts, no ancient monuments. We mind our business and the less work the policeman and the postman have to do the better they're pleased. Now be a good chap and leave me in peace, will you? I've got plenty on my hands and it's the girl's half day."

The visitor made no move. Instead he seemed to be weighing chances, or perhaps making a diagnosis.

"The Old Man's retired," he said at last. "Bill Mason's the boss now. You'd remember him?"

"Good lord," said Simpson involuntarily. "Bill, of all people. What happened to Macduff then?"

"Mac had an accident in Berlin two years ago. I'll tell you about it if you're interested. You knew him pretty well?"

Too late Simpson saw that he had taken the bait: he struggled for escape. "Look here, I don't want to talk about that sort of thing. It's not for me any longer. I run this little store and nobody gives a damn about the Department—which they've never heard of—or wars—or—"

"Bill Mason sent you a message," said the young man. "He said you'd read it for Mac's sake if not for his. May I give it to you?" He fumbled in an inner pocket and produced a plain envelope which contained a typewritten single sheet. It was unsigned and had no heading.

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This is Jason's corner for me. You are the only man in the world, quite literally, who can get me round it.

A sudden ancient reflex made Simpson burn it and crush the twisted ashes among cigarette ends in a tray.

"I don't know why we have to be so damn theatrical," said the young man. "That gibberish didn't mean anything to me. Something before my time perhaps?"

"Yes," agreed Simpson absently. "As you say, before your time. But urgent all the same. Cry for help, so to speak."

"Then you'll come?"

"Oh, damn and blast everything!" said Simpson. "The Department in general and you in particular coupled with the name of Bill Mason. How long will it take, this job?"

The young man looked at his watch. "I'll run you to town," he said. "We'll be there in two hours at the outside. Job itself might take an hour—five minutes with luck. You should be back by this evening and no one a penny the wiser. I'll brief you in the car. Shall we go?"

The car was long, low, rackety, and very fast, making conversation impossible. As they approached Eastern Avenue the young man swung abruptly into a lay-by and switched off the engine.

"This is the gen," he said. "I'm going to drop you off at the first likely tube station. You go to Tottenham Court Road—no changing, if I remember—then to Postillion Street, just by the British Museum. Know it? Good. The pub on the corner is called the Welsh Harp, God knows why. It has two bars. The Private looks straight across to the classy one, but has an entrance in the other street. No one can go in or out of the main bar without being seen, which is useful. There are little glass partitions—sort of windows—in yours, so that you are pretty well hidden. Got that?"

"I know the pub, I know the bar. I even know the landlord, if he's still there," said Simpson. "What then?"

"You watch. You stay there till closing time, if necessary. But as soon as you see a familiar face the job is done. You just pass the information on to a man who'll be standing around drinking. A little man, shiny blue suit, flat 'at, white neckerchief, drinking port. You call him Bert. You say, 'I bet that bloke grows roses,' and point out the character in question. Then you buy Bert a drink and you can go home. It's as simple as that."

Simpson frowned. "It's not quite good enough," he said. "I don't like working in the dark and never did. Ask Bill Mason. Now just why does it have to be me?"

"I'd have thought that was obvious," said the young man, and paused. He lit a cigarette and pulled hard at it, considering

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two courses, just as he had done in the shop. "O.K. then. I'll come clean—as clean as I can, that is. You are the only person, probably literally the only person in the world, who can make the identification. It's this-a-way. We've picked up some short-wave stuff which is pretty important this side of the curtain. Part of it concerns a rendezvous and we've only just got it deciphered. It's for half past one today at the Welsh Harp. Now do you get it?"

"Not entirely." Simpson was obstinate. "Give a little more."

"What we don't know," said the young man, "is either of the two people who are to meet. If we had one we'd have t'other, you see. But one of them—and this is the big if—one of them might be Charleyboy himself. You see it's important? If the matter interests you: it was Charleyboy who fixed poor old Mac in Berlin, that's for certain."

Simpson whistled. "Charleyboy," he said. "That bastard. I knew he was a killer, but weren't we all? The difference was that Charleyboy liked it. He disappeared towards the end of my time. I'd hoped he was dead."

"Somewhere in gaol more likely. Absent from the scene for six years, which suggests a sentence somewhere or other. The trouble is we don't know where. You realise of course that there's no picture of him in our little gallery and that no one—except you—has ever seen him? That's why you're vital this afternoon."

Simpson was casting his mind back. Autumn 1945. A bombed-out cellar in Hamburg which was hardly credible as a hideout beneath so much rubble. A rat-hole café for black marketeers, displaced persons who wished no identification, half-starved tarts, and the unsavoury jetsam of international traitors.

He remembered the stink and the terrible home-brewed German gin, and Charleyboy selling the hiding-places of war criminals for thirty pieces of silver. He remembered the yellow puffy face, the pale blue chin, the codfish eyes, and the greasy but primly respectable suit that looked as if it might cover the filth of a lifetime.

"Yes," he said at last. "I think I'd know him again, even after fifteen years. I'd know him by the pricking of my thumbs, if by nothing else. Drive on."

The Welsh Harp is the most predictable of London hostelries. The private bar has taxi drivers, elderly locals, and manual workers from the Museum as its clientele. They are discreetly hidden from the parlour lounge by a cut-glass screen which hinges coyly at intervals to permit of orders and to hide the customers from the superior eyes of the students, the Reading

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Room men, the publishers, and the secondhand book salesmen who patronise the main bar. It was going to be just like falling off a log, he decided.

In the far corner there was the clearly identifiable Bert, with whom he exchanged a cautious wink. Armed with a pint and a racing edition, Simpson found himself the perfect station by a small pivoted window which was permanently open. At twenty-five past one the insignificant figure in the cloth cap sidled up to him, belching lightly over a fresh glass of port.

At half past one precisely the double doors of the bar parlour swung back and a man pushed unhurriedly through them. He edged through the crowd, caught a barmaid's eye with remarkable speed, and called for two gins. As the girl presented the glasses he changed the order.

"I asked for whisky, miss," he said. "This is gin."

The girl made no particular fuss, and very soon a drab woman with a shopping basket turned towards him and picked up the second glass, without acknowledgment.

She's the contact, thought Simpson, and that, after all these years, is Charleyboy. Charleyboy in person, the biggest dealer in all the small change of international dirty washing and traitory since Judas. He was not greatly changed: a little heavier, a little cleaner, and very much more wealthy, but the same bland cold smile which had pure evil in the recipe.

At one-thirty-two Simpson turned to Bert. "I bet that bloke grows roses," he remarked, and found his observation well received.

"The same again, eh?"

At one-thirty-three the landlord opened all the available windows to deliver the port and exclaimed with a shout of professional pleasure.

"Well! Well! Well! If it isn't Mr. Simpson. Ted Simpson in person, after all these years. Now what on earth brings you here?"

At the corner of Tottenham Court Road, Simpson knew that he was being followed. The information brought an exhilaration which surprised him: this was a day off from the real business of life, a visit to the old school but without its threat of discipline.

At the White Horse on the corner he waited until his shadow had placed himself at the bar and then took a malicious delight in leaving before the grey unremarkable man could consume the drink he had been forced to order. He called a taxi and shouted, "Paddington," to the driver, changed the instructions five minutes later, and dropped off in a traffic jam so that he could

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dive conveniently into the rabbit warren of Piccadilly Circus. An exit brought him directly to a cinema where he bought a ticket before any other customer had crossed the quilted foyer.

At five-fifteen he walked out by a side exit, just before the main picture was over, and took coffee in an espresso. The proper course would be to ring the Department and tell them of his little adventure, but he was in no mood for liaison. This was a holiday—he had done all that was required in loyalty.

But by the time he had reached lower Haymarket two men were on his tail: heavy purposeful figures who knew at least as much about the game as he did himself.

He was still in the mood. He wandered among the evening office workers, took a tube, and changed twice almost at random. At Sloane Square he remembered a small drinking club off the King's Road where there would be no strangers . . .

There is no longer a railway line to Benham St. Mary for it was pulled up two years ago to advance modern transport. Travellers to that pleasant haven get off at Cursitor Junction and make their own way. The last bus leaves an hour before the last train arrives and the solitary taxi driver keeps to his own early hours.

Thus Simpson found himself walking the five miles through the low mist of the warm spring night. The road bends and twists in accordance with the feudal centuries, but the country is flat.

The mist lay in stray inert pockets across his way, giving a floating effect to trees and fences. At Little Benham, the next village to home, he became aware that a car was pottering quietly behind him, using only its sidelights. He dodged into a dry ditch and it passed him, a small tradesman's van with two men inside.

He gave them ten minutes and trudged on until the outlines above the mist became reassuringly familiar—the long barn of Rigg's Farm, the three great fuddy-duddy elms, and the gothic roof of the vicarage with its foot-warmer of respectable laurels. Only four hundred yards to go before the King's Head, the forge, and the shop. Thank God for Benham St. Mary, Balmy Benham, on the road to nowhere, the unassailable sanctuary where nothing made even a guidebook paragraph.

By the vicarage drive, with its white five-barred gate perpetually open, he paused for a moment to see if a light still burnt, but everything was still and black, a paper silhouette embedded in cottonwool.

He heard the sound, a " phut " as if a cane had struck a pillow sharply, and felt a stinging pain in his left arm. The mist was almost waist high and he dropped into it on the grass verge.

For a long time, a five full minutes, he lay completely still, his

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ears picking up every granule of silence, until he located the sound he was expecting.

Footsteps were approaching, slowly and cautiously, a hunter on padded feet closing for the kill.

The pain in his arm was acute but not agonising, a vicious scratch, enough to make him very angry indeed. His opponent loomed suddenly, very close, within a hand's touch. He reached forward with his good arm and brought him to the ground beside him, sprawling. Even in his fury Simpson received a shock. His adversary stank like a polecat, a sickening blend of all the personal affronts to civilised man.

They fought viciously, without rules but unlike animals, in complete silence.

Neither man was young and neither in any sort of condition for sustained effort, but Simpson's blinding anger had wiped the years away for a few vital moments. His arm was now giving him a fierce ecstasy of pain and he was remembering every dirty trick in the book. Gradually he reached the essential grip and beat his attacker's head savagely back on to the tarmac.

The man screamed, a high-pitched inhuman sound, and lay quite still. Simpson stood up and shook himself; his left arm had resigned and was completely numb.

Out of the mist two figures came running with torches, and a headlight brought a white blanket of confusion to the scene.

"Simpson, isn't it?" said a voice. "Bill Mason here. Are you O.K.? We couldn't spot you in all this fog, even though we were just behind you. Now, just who is our pal?" He knelt down. "It's Charleyboy, isn't it?"

There was a long pause before he straightened his back and muttered, "You're a very rough and careless fellow, Ted Simpson, when you're roused, and you always were. Between you and me and the gatepost, I think you've killed him. That gives us all a delicate little problem, to which there is only one solution.

"You get the hell out of here. Go home to bed and remember that the whole thing never happened—it was nice seeing you. By the way, don't worry your pretty head about Charleyboy's chum—he's been looked after. You can sleep tight . . ."

The shop at Benham St. Mary is not well lit at the best of times. Piles of soapflakes, tins, mops, and bargain offers blot out the little windows and provide discreet shadows. Simpson managed a painful morning's work and kept to the darker corners where the bruise on his cheek was unnoticed and his one good arm could do duty without remark.

The vicar however was in garrulous mood. He settled himself.

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" A remarkable thing—a most extraordinary thing, I may say—happened last night," he said. " There was quite a disturbance outside the house. A fight or a quarrel of some sort, and a couple of cars. I heard it distinctly."

" Teddyboys from Cursitor, after a dance," suggested Simpson.

" Not quite, I think," said the vicar. " This is what I found in the vicarage drive this morning."

He opened his hand and displayed his trophy.

" Of course, you weren't in the war, were you? But even I as a padre recognise this. It's a spent round from a .38 revolver."

" It seems a very little one," said Simpson mendaciously. " Best to forget it. It couldn't have done much harm."

" Couldn't it? " said the vicar, laughing. " Many a good man has lost his life through one of these, let me tell you. Still, it looks harmless enough. How it came to be lying on my path though, I don't know. The ' trivial round ' one might call it—and that's all we ask for at Benham St. Mary, isn't it? Forget it."

" Very wise," said Simpson. " When one's found a bit of peace hang on to it, that's what I say! "

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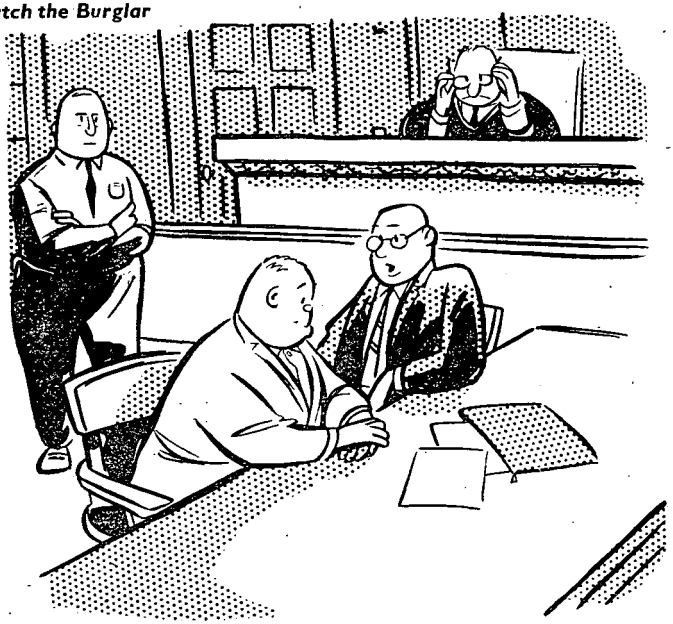
Butch the Burglar



" I'm sorry, but there are no brochures, Butch. The judge decides what gaol you're sent to."

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A SHOW OF SPIRIT

A pleasure to have about the farm, he was

BY E. L. MALPASS

AS NICE an old ghost as you could wish to meet, Brother Cadwallader. Never any trouble. Always ready to fade into the next room when we had company. Never clanked his chains after nine in the evening. A pleasure to have about the farm, he was.

Only one thing, though. Didn't get on with Grandpa. Or rather Grandpa didn't get on with him. Grandpa was strict chapel, see, and said it wasn't right having a medieval monk in a Nonconformist household, disembodied though he might be. Not that Brother Cadwallader seemed to have any denominational bias. Pleased as Punch he used to look when Mother invited him to join in round the harmonium of a Sunday evening.

One other fault Cadwallader had. He was cold. Didn't seem to feel it himself, mind. But everybody else did. He emitted cold as an electric fire emits heat.

Very useful in the summer, of course, when Mother used to get him to spend as much time as possible in the larder. "No fear of the milk turning sour with Mr. Cadwallader around," she would say. "As good as a fridge, he is."

But in winter it was different. He and the fire just about cancelled each other out. Grandpa would probably have made him spend winter in the woodshed. But Mother wouldn't hear of it.

"Poor old man," she would say. "Not having him out there, catching his death." So she let him stay in the parlour, which was only used at Christmas. And very grateful he was, too.

But the trouble began when Father decided to install a television receiver. "Poor we may be," he said, "but very educational it will be for the children." Dead against the idea from the start, Grandpa was, however.

"Why?" Father demanded. "That's all I want to know. Why?"

A little fat chap, Grandpa. Quivered like a jelly when he was

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put out—as he usually was. Eyes glared terrible. Now he gave his reasons, numbering them off on his stumpy fingers.

One: it was against nature. If the good Lord had intended us to sit in the Welsh hills and watch half naked women cavorting in London, He would have given us telescopic eyes for the purpose.

Two: all that ironmongery on the roof would have the chimney down in no time.

Three: that same ironmongery was an open invitation to any piece of lightning in the neighbourhood to Step This Way.

"Thunderbolts hurtling down the chimney night and day there will be," concluded the old gentleman.

My father listened. Then: "And I say we are having a television receiver. If you had your way, still ploughing the Abbey Farm with oxen and a sharp flint we should be."

Glared up into my father's dark, saturnine face did Grandpa. And knew himself beaten. For the farm was my father's, not his. And well they both knew it.

Oh, a wonderful day that was when the telly came. One of those clean October days when the mess of summer has been tidied up and the whole countryside looks as though it has had a good going over with the vacuum. A clear crisp day with the smoke standing straight up under the open sky and the voice of Evans the Electronics coming sweet and far from the roof where he was hammering the aerial to the chimney.

The clear day brought frost at nightfall. Oh, cold it was that evening, with the first dry cold of winter. But what did we care? There we all were in the big farm kitchen, all crowded round the great fire, all waiting for the wonderful moment when Father would switch on the television receiver for the first time.

All except Grandpa, who sat on a hard chair by the door, impervious it seemed to the general excitement.

"Why, Grandpa, there is frozen you will be," Mother cried. "Joining the family circle, is it?"

Grandpa looked up, crabby as you please. "Not getting me near that fireplace," he said. "Coming down on top of us any moment now, that old chimney will be."

"Oh, don't be so silly, Grandpa," Mother said. But budge the old gentleman would not.

And very soon we forgot Grandpa and his troubles. For Father turned the switch. And television came to Abbey Farm.

Never did you see anything like it! Cowboys galloping this way and that, guns banging, fists cracking on jaws, oh, exciting it was. Even Father cheered. And after a time Grandpa, by

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the door, could stand it no longer. Wandered across he did, hands in pockets, scowling. Glared at the screen. "A fine horse, that," he said grudgingly.

"They have all fine horses," said Father.

"Hm. I enjoy seeing good horseflesh." He watched, leaning on Mother's chair. After a time she stood up.

"Sit you down, Grandpa," she said kindly.

He grunted, took her seat. Oh, what an evening that was. Watched everything we did, while the frost painted the fields outside, and inside the fire leapt in the vast hearth, and Grandpa and Mother and Father, we children, the china dogs on the dresser, Owen the sheepdog, and Betsi the cat, all stared at the little screen, scarce daring to blink.

And then, who should come through the wall but Cadwallader!

Quite forgotten him, we had. He came slowly towards us, hands clasped in front of him. Then he caught sight of the television.

Stopped he did, spellbound. An expression of utter delight spread across his medieval face. Without taking his eyes for a moment from the screen, he groped for a chair, sat down, goggled.

Fell by about twenty degrees, the temperature in the room did. Soon got Grandpa fidgeting. Kept glaring at Cadwallader. Then he turned his coat collar up, blew on his hands, stamped his feet, hunched his shoulders. Finally slipped out during the commercials and fetched a travelling-rug.

But all this was wasted on Cadwallader. Wouldn't have noticed if the rest of the party had all turned to blocks of ice. Too intent on telly.

Well, it was understandable, of course. As Mother said, it must have made a very welcome change for the old gentleman, after four hundred years of fairly aimless pottering around the Abbey Farm. It brought an interest into his after-life.

But when Mother came down the next morning, there in the cold grey dawn she saw Cadwallader. Perched in front of the telly he was, waiting, hopeful.

"Why, Mr. Cadwallader, the programme will not be starting for hours yet," she said gently. She told us afterwards that the look he gave her nearly broke her heart. "Come back about one o'clock," she said, "and I will switch it on for you."

But at twelve-fifty-five Grandpa was there, crouched towards the set like a jockey towards the winning-post. At one o'clock Brother Cadwallader, to his intense annoyance, joined him. And the two of them sat there the livelong day, speechless, absorbed, glued.

Oh, but cold it was in the kitchen. Cadwallader did not

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normally stay so long in the same room. Usually he spread his chill fairly evenly about the house. But, concentrated in one place, it was a bit severe. By teatime Grandpa had got us children running to and fro with relays of hot water bottles. But even so, his teeth were beginning to chatter.

And that night, when the television had closed down and Brother Cadwallader had drifted away, Grandpa delivered his ultimatum. "Either he goes or I go," he said. "And if I go, my money goes with me."

A gleam had come into my father's eye at Grandpa's first sentence; but it faded at his second. No point in killing the goose that will one day lay a golden egg. Besides, it was not easy to drag a living out of the thin soil of the Abbey Farm. And what Grandpa paid for his keep just about tipped the balance.

So Father said, "It's no use, Mother. You must tell Cadwallader to go. Can't have Grandpa getting pneumonia."

Upset, Mother was. Very soft-hearted, see. Couldn't bear to hurt anyone, even an old ghost. But when she broached the subject to Cadwallader the next morning, he was regretful but adamant. Shook his head. "Doomed I am to haunt this spot for five hundred years."

"Why, whatever had you done?" Agog, Mother was.

"I fell asleep in Compline." The old monk smiled sadly.

"And you got five hundred years for that!" Mother was shaken. It looked as though she would be putting in a few long stints when her time came, she told herself.

She sought out Grandpa. "Spoken to Mr. Cadwallader I have, but he is not allowed to leave," she explained.

"Then go I will, and live with your brother Tomos, pausing only to visit my solicitor on the way," shouted Grandpa. "A good house, has Tomos, central heating and no chilly apparitions."

And go he did, too, leaving his daughter and son-in-law to face hardship and penury.

Well, there is hard, you will say. But why did not Mother, in this predicament, banish Cadwallader to the parlour?

That kind heart of hers was the answer. But she did speak to the spirit. Told him what had happened. And very concerned Cadwallader was. Preyed on his mind, it must have done. For when Mother and Father woke next morning from a troubled sleep, the first thing they saw was Cadwallader standing beside their bed.

"During the night watches I have been thinking," he said without preamble. "Wondering whether I should tell you about

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Abbot John's treasure as a recompense for the trouble I have caused you."

Sat up in bed sudden, Father did at that. "Abbot John's treasure? What on earth is that?"

"Buried a great black box, Abbot John did. Just before the Dissolution. When the Abbey Farm really was an Abbey. 'Brother Cadwallader,' he said to me. 'There are great riches in that box.'"

Nearly for hopping out of bed, was Father. "But where is it? Where did he bury it?"

"That is what I cannot remember," Cadwallader said sadly.

Sank back groaning on the pillows, Father did. Terrible it is when the candle of hope, almost extinguished, gives one bright flicker and then expires.

"But Mr. Cadwallader, you *must* remember," cried Mother, sitting up and beating her knees with her fists.

Cadwallader shook his head. "Changed quite a bit, the old place has, since it was an Abbey. Nevertheless—" he gave her a delightful smile—"put on my thinking-cap, I will."

"You'd better," Mother said. "And now, run along, old man. Getting up I am. Got to start digging."

By that evening we had pretty well torn the farm apart. Kept getting ideas, Cadwallader did. "Try under the sink," he would say. Or, "Dig a bit here, Mr. Griffiths."

But to no avail. And then, just as Mother was thinking of pouring out the supper milk, Father's pick struck something.

Down he was then on his hands and knees, scrabbling and clawing and tugging. And sure enough, out of the earth he pulled a small iron chest. Oh, there was excitement for you.

"Open it, Father. Open it, Father," we children cried, dancing around in our eagerness.

Mother went and flopped on a chair, fanning herself with her hand. And as for Cadwallader, he was one huge delighted beam.

Easier said than done, to get that chest open. But at last Father worked his pick under the lid. He heaved. Groaning horrible, the chest allowed itself to be prised open. Father shone his torch inside. No one spoke. We could not even look at each other. We just stared, hypnotised, into that empty chest.

Empty. Except for a scrap of discoloured parchment, which Father picked up with distaste, examined, and then handed to Cadwallader.

Studied it carefully, the monk did. Then: "Well, the crafty old Abbot," he said. "The secret recipe."

"What secret recipe?" asked Father, who was feeling discouraged.

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"Why, for Abbot John's wine. Never would he tell us the secret. To each Brother he would impart as much as he needed to know for his share in the preparation. But that was all. The secret he kept himself."

Yawning, Mother was. "Is it nice?"

"If you have never tasted Abbot John's wine," Cadwallader said devoutly, "then indeed you have never lived. A few sips . . . what ecstasy! And a cup or two . . . very conducive to sleep!"

"Like that, is it?" said Father, beginning to take an interest. "We had better make some, Mother."

But Mother had principles. "Non-alcoholic, is it?" she asked.

Looked doubtful, Cadwallader did. "Such at least was not the Reverend Father's intention," he said.

Nor was it. A few sips of that glorious tipple and you were ready to fight the English or sing the whole of *Judas Maccabaeus* or run up Snowdon and take a flying leap on to the moon, according to your temperament. As Mother and Father discovered when they brewed their first dolly-tub full. Coloured the most delicate gold, it was, and it tasted of honey and heather and all the sweet rich fruitfulness of autumn.

"Make our fortunes, we shall," said Father, after his first swig.

But bedevilled by her Nonconformist conscience, Mother was. "Not going into the liquor trade, is it?" she said, very virtuous.

Come up against Mother's Nonconformist conscience before, Father had. His heart sank. "Not suggesting we waste it, are you, woman?"

"Have a glass at Christmas, maybe. But we are not *selling* it," Mother said firmly.

Very disconsolate, Father was. He knew Mother. And that evening, to cheer himself up, he slipped a teaspoonful of the wine into his supper milk.

There was no doubt about it: that milk was strangely fortifying. Father considered. And when Mother wasn't around he removed the tub of wine into the dairy. He took a ladle. He put about a gill into each milk churn.

And that simple act marked the change in our fortunes. Very popular, our milk became, very popular indeed. And no one seemed to know why. It was just that people liked it.

Father bought more cows. He took on more cowmen. And still the demand grew. The local Marketing Board was able to change its slogan to DRINKA QUARTA MILKA DAY. And at last the time came when it was clear we must leave the Abbey Farm for broader, richer pastures. And that meant leaving Cadwallader!,

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Oh, sad it was, seeing the old monk for the last time. There he stood, in the doorway, his hand raised in blessing and farewell.

"Good-bye, old man," Mother called. "Don't let the new people push you around."

He smiled. "Be leaving myself soon, now," he said. "Only another ninety-eight years."

We drove off. "Poor old chap," Mother said. "Five hundred years—just for going to sleep in Compline."

We drove on. "Wonder where that old Compline is?" Mother said drowsily.

"Italy, shouldn't wonder," said Father.

We were down in the valley now. Looking back, you could still see the windows of Abbey Farm, catching the sunlight. But too far away to see old ghosts.

"Hope the new people will treat him right," Mother said, laying her head on Father's shoulder. "Not put him in the woodshed or anything. Bound to feel the cold he is, after Italy."

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VISUAL-EYES

Man's earliest pastime, I suppose,
Was to play with his fingers and his toes.
Then later, wearying of himself,
He devised the monster and the elf,
Enlivening his existence drab
With Blunderbore and Puck and Mab.
A modern man, in modern Maryland,
I boast my private gate to fairyland,
My kaleidoscope, my cornucopia,
My own philosopher's stone, myopia.
Except when rationalised by lenses,
My world is not what other men's is;
Unless I have my glasses on,
The postman is a leprechaun,
I can wish on either of two new moons,
Billboards are graven with mystic runes,
Shirts hung to dry are ragtag gipsies,
Mud puddles loom like Mississipsies,
And billiard balls resemble plums,
And street lamps are chrysanthemums.
If my vision were twenty-twenty,
I should miss miracles a-plenty.

OGDEN NASH, *And How Keen Was The Vision Of Sir Launfal?*

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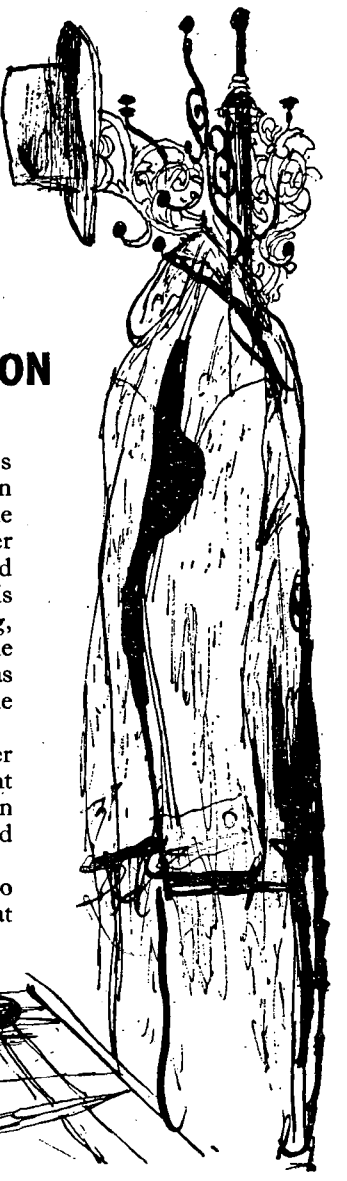
A New Maigret

RUE PIGALLE

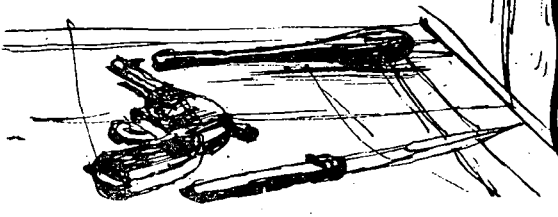
By GEORGES SIMENON



ANYONE dropping in at Marina's would no doubt have been completely taken in. Lucien, the patron, in a thick fawn sweater which made him look shorter and broader, was fussing about with his bottles behind the bar, decanting, recorking, meticulously changing the washer on the tap. And if he was surly, that could be put down to the early hour and the weather.

It was a grey morning and colder than usual, a morning that might bring snow, a morning to linger in bed. It was just on nine o'clock, and the rue Pigalle was not very lively.

The chance customer would no doubt have wondered who that



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large gentleman was, sitting there in a thick overcoat and smoking his pipe, with his back against the stove, nursing a drink in his hand. He would certainly not have thought of Chief Inspector Maigret of Police Headquarters.

On the floor, dusting the table legs, he might have noticed a Breton servant girl, Julie, with a scared look, her face covered with freckles, and her clothes in rags.

In the Pigalle restaurants business rarely starts early. The clearing-up had not been done. Dirty glasses were still standing about, and through the open door into the kitchen could be seen the patronne, Marina herself, looking more bedraggled and lop-sided than her servant girl.

It was all rather peaceful and familiar. Two men were still sitting at the back table, but they didn't look so bad, although they were unshaven, and their suits were creased as if they had been up all night.

In fact, the casual customer would have seen nothing there but a small restaurant like any other, a restaurant with a regular clientele. Not very clean, admittedly, but not a bad place on a chilly morning.

He would, no doubt, have changed his mind if he had seen Maigret, suddenly noticing on the coat-stand a camelhair coat belonging to one of the customers, advance on it, put his hand in the pockets, and draw out, without any sign of surprise, a compact American rubber truncheon. Even more so if he had heard the Inspector remark cheerfully, "Hey, Christiani—is that still my one?"

Half an hour earlier, as he was arriving at the quai des Orfèvres, Maigret had been called to the telephone by someone who insisted on speaking to him personally. The caller was obviously trying to disguise his voice. "Is that the Inspector himself? Well, then, there was quite a to-do last night at Marina's. If you took a little walk that way you'd perhaps meet your friend Christiani. And it might occur to you to ask him for news of Martino—you know, the youngster from Antibes whose brother's just been shipped off to Guiana?"

Five minutes later Maigret had found out from the exchange that the telephone call had come from a tobacconist's in the rue Notre Dame de Lorette. A quarter of an hour after he got out of a taxi at the corner of rue Pigalle, where, at that time, the gutters were heaped high with rubbish.

Maigret, who still knew nothing, would have sworn it was a serious matter—probably very serious, for informers like that rarely made up their stories.

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The proof he had immediately, as he was walking slowly up the street. Almost opposite Marina's, and wedged surprisingly between the night clubs, he spotted a small bar like those in Auvergne. In this bar, on the lookout close to the window, the Inspector recognised two men, one from Nice and Pepito, who were not usually to be met with so early, especially in such a place.

The next moment he was pushing open the door of the restaurant on the other side of the street. At the back he caught sight of Christiani in company with a young recruit, René Lecœur, who was called the Bank Clerk, because he had worked in a bank at Marseilles.

In this kind of affair it is better not to be surprised by anything. Maigret tipped his hat to them all, just like any old regular coming in for a quick one. "How goes it, Lucien?"

That didn't prevent him noting that the cloth the patron held in his hands was trembling, or that the maid, straightening up suddenly, bumped her head on the table.

"Busy last night? Give me a coffee and a small calvados." Then, going into the kitchen, "How are you, Marina? I see someone broke your mirror for you over the bar."

He had noticed immediately that a mirror had been shattered by a revolver shot.

"That was done long ago," Lucien explained hurriedly. "Some fellow I didn't know. He'd just bought a gun, and didn't know it was loaded . . ."

Since then it had been slow going. Maigret had been there for more than a quarter of an hour, and not more than twenty remarks had been exchanged. While the maid went on with her work, and Lucien stayed at the bar, and Marina busied herself in the kitchen, the Inspector smoked his pipe, drank his calvados, went over from time to time to glance across at the bistro opposite, and walked back to the stove.

He knew the place like the back of his hand. Lucien, after having been in some trouble in Marseilles, had turned over a new leaf, and opened up this little Montmartre restaurant, which he ran with his wife. The clientele was drawn mainly from former pals of his—gangsters, certainly, but most of them had mended their ways and become almost respectable.

Such was the case with Christiani, who ten years before, on being arrested, had not hesitated to cosh Maigret, and who now owned two brothels in Paris and another at Barcelonnette.

It was much the same with the men across the street, especially the Niçois, who owned two brothels, like Christiani, but, unfortunately, in competition with him.

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The Niçois was from the Marseilles gang, as they said in the trade, while Christiani was boss of the Corsicans.

"Tell me, has your little friend over the way been there long?"

"I don't bother about people like that," Christiani retorted scornfully.

"Maybe not. But he—he seems to me to be bothering about you. And, you know, if I didn't know you better, I'd think it was his presence in the little bistro that's preventing you leaving."

A pause. A mouthful of calvados.

"Yes. I'd figure it out this way. Last night, for one reason or another, something bad must have happened. And since then the Niçois and Pepito have been waiting for you outside, so that you've been obliged to sleep sitting up, the pair of you . . ." While speaking, he had approached the Clerk and was now patting the creases in his jacket.

"Only, I wonder what could have happened, seeing that everyone knows Lucien doesn't like trouble, and you yourself no longer dabble in this sort of thing. By the way, Martino's brother, who embarked from the Ile de Ré yesterday, sends his regards . . ."

All very friendly. Good-humoured, too. All the same Christiani had started, and the Clerk jumped to his feet. Taking advantage of this, Maigret patted his pockets, and drew out a powerful flick-knife. "Dangerous stuff, sonny. Shouldn't go round with toys like that. And you, Christiani, haven't you anything for me in your pocket?"

Christiani shrugged his shoulders, took out a Smith and Wesson revolver, and handed it over to the Inspector.

"Well! One bullet's missing. No doubt the one that broke the mirror. What really surprises me is that you haven't replaced the bullet, and you haven't bothered to clean the barrel."

He slipped knife, truncheon, and revolver into the pocket of his overcoat and, without seeming to, proceeded to search every corner, even opening the icebox and the telephone booth. But, above all, his mind was hard at work. He was trying to understand. He built up hypotheses, and rejected them, one after the other.

"You know the Niçois told Martino that someone 'squealed' on his brother? At least, so I've just heard. If I let you go, it's so that you can avoid him, for he could bear you a grudge, and he has a habit of being armed."

"What're you getting at?" grumbled Christiani, who appeared to be keeping as calm as Maigret.

"Nothing. I'd like to see Martino. I don't know why, but I'd be interested to see him . . ."

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Meanwhile he had made certain that nobody, alive or dead, was hidden in the restaurant or in either the kitchen or Lucien and Marina's bedroom, which opened off it.

At half past nine a delivery man brought in a case of aperitifs, and then, almost immediately after, a huge yellow removal van from the firm of Duchemin drew up in front of the building, and left again a little later.

"Marina, give me a slice of that homemade sausage of yours."

Then, suddenly, Maigret's brows furrowed, for out of the bedroom there emerged a new character, who was as surprised as the Inspector.

"Where've *you* come from?"

"I—I was lying down."

It was Fred, an associate of Christiani's in certain of his businesses. And he was lying, for Maigret had just ascertained that the bedroom was empty.

"From what I can see," the Inspector grumbled, "you are all so attached to this place that you won't leave it. Give me your gun, too."

Fred hesitated, then handed over his revolver, another Smith and Wesson, fully loaded.

"You'll give it back to me?"

"Maybe. That's going to depend on what Martino tells me. I'm expecting him any minute now . . . Yes, I told him to meet me here."

He was watching their faces; he saw René Lecœur grow pale and empty his glass.

One more attempt. He had at all costs to hit on it, and Maigret did, the moment he caught sight of a heavy lorry passing in the street outside.

"Take the receiver off," he ordered Christiani. He didn't want to go into the booth: from there he couldn't keep an eye on his flock.

"Get me Police Headquarters. Ask for Lucas . . . You've got him? Hand me the receiver."

Luckily the flex was long enough.

"Is that you, Lucas? You're to ring immediately to Duchemin, the removal people. You must trace a van of theirs that has just delivered or picked up something at rue Pigalle. Understand? See what it is. Quick as you can. I'll stay here, yes."

Then, turning towards the kitchen, "What about that sausage, Marina?"

"Here you are, Inspector. Here you are."

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"I don't think these gentlemen want any. If I'm not very much mistaken, they aren't feeling hungry."

At ten past eleven everyone was still in his place, including the Niçois and his companion in the bar opposite. At eleven minutes past eleven Lucas jumped out of a taxi in great excitement, pushed open the door, and signalled to Maigret that he had something important to tell him.

"You can speak in front of these gentlemen—they're friends."

"I was able to catch the van at boulevard Rochechouart. They picked up a trunk. They were telephoned for from here—a tenant on the third floor, Monsieur Bécheval. A huge trunk, or rather a chest, to be sent by goods train to Quimper."

"You let it go, I hope?" Maigret said, jokingly.

"I had it opened . . . There was a body inside—Martino, the brother of—"

"I know. Go on."

"Dr. Paul was at home, and he was able to come immediately. I have the bullet, which was still in the wound."

Maigret toyed with it casually, and murmured, as if to himself, "Browning, 6.35 mm. You see how this is turning out. These gentlemen, who spent the night here, have only Smith and Wessons."

There was no way of foreseeing what he was about to do. Even at that moment nobody coming in would have sensed anything dramatic. Lucien was still straining himself to keep busy behind the bar.

"Would you like to know what I think? Keep it between ourselves, eh? Last night Martino, who had been drinking too much, made up his mind it was because of Christiani that his brother had been packed off to Guiana. He came back to pay him out, but as it turned out he was so much on edge that he met with an accident. You see?"

Even Lucas wondered what his chief was getting at. Christiani lit a cigarette and blew out the smoke with assumed nonchalance.

"Only, the Niçois and Pepito were waiting out in the street. They didn't dare to come in, but waited for the others at the door instead.

"D'you see now? That's why our friends here slept sitting while the Niçois did sentry-go outside, and then, at first light, took up his position in the bar. The biggest problem was this blessed corpse, which couldn't, after all, just be left on Lucien's hands. What would you have done, Christiani? You're a clever man."

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Christiani shrugged his shoulders disdainfully.

"Answer me, Lucien—what is this Bécheval from the third floor?"

"A helpless old man."

"That's just as I thought. Someone went up there in the early morning and told him to keep his mouth shut. Before the household awoke they fetched the corpse upstairs, going by the back way, and locked it up in one of the old man's chests. Then they telephoned to Duchemin.

"Go and ask on the third floor if that isn't right. I'm sure they'll come out with a description of our friend Fred here, who took on the job."

"What does that prove?" Fred growled.

"Certainly not that it was you who bumped him off. Marina! Give them some sausage, after all. I'm going to bring them to HQ, and it might take me quite a time to deal with them."

Still no sign of tragedy—as was proved when a cashier came in with a bill and completed his business with Lucien, without noticing anything.

"You've still got nothing to say to me, Christiani?"

"Nothing."

"And you, Clerk? I must say, this is the first time I've found you mixed up in a serious affair."

"I don't understand what you're talking about," the youngster said in a strained voice.

"Then there's nothing to do but wait for Lucas."

They waited. And across the street the others were still waiting, too. And the street got busier as the sky cleared a little and the day brightened.

"Bad luck, Lucien, that this should have happened at your place! Must never let your mirror get broken: it's bad luck."

Lucas was back already, announcing, "Just as you said. I found the old man gagged. He gave me a description of Fred, but there was someone else, too, last night, but he didn't see him. They jumped on him while he was still asleep."

"That's fine! Phone for a taxi. Wait! Phone HQ as well for them to send someone to watch those fellows opposite so that they don't start something."

And, scratching his head, Maigret looked at his trio of beauties, and sighed, "By then perhaps we'll know which of you did the shooting."

Maigret, like a man with all the time in the world and nothing to do with it, picked one of the tables, and spread out on it a real display, placing Christiani's truncheon beside his revolver and

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Fred's, then putting Lecœur's knife a little distance away.

"Now, don't get worked up about what I'm going to say to you, son," he threw at Lecœur, who looked as if he was about to faint. "This is your first job, but it probably won't be your last. That revolver there, you see, is definitely Christiani's—he's been too long in the game to play around with a little Browning like the one that killed Martino. Fred, too, is an old hand, who prefers serious weapons. When the fighting broke out, Christiani fired, but somebody must have knocked his arm because all that he hit was the mirror. Then you, with your little Browning—"

"I haven't got a Browning!" the Clerk managed to bring out.

"Precisely! *It's just because you haven't got one that it must have been you who fired.* Fred kept his gun, because he knew it would prove his innocence. Christiani didn't even clean his, to prove that he fired only one bullet, which didn't hit anybody. They both know what they're about, and they both stuck to the rules. While you—you had to get rid of your revolver as it would have proved you're the murderer. Where did you put it?"

"I didn't kill anyone!"

"I'm asking you where you put it!"

"Ask Christiani."

"It's too late to put on an act."

"You won't find a Browning."

Maigret looked at him pityingly and murmured, tight-lipped, "You poor fool!"

The more so as Martino was not out to get him, and, if he had really fired the shot, it was to prove to the others that he had the nerve to do so.

When Lucas returned, Maigret said to him in an undertone, "Look everywhere, especially on the roof. They wouldn't have been stupid enough to hide the gun here at Lucien's, or in the old man's place. Oh yes—at the top of the stairs, there's a skylight to the roof."

He led away his troop, while two or three suspiciously innocent-looking strollers kept watch on the bistro opposite.

Christiani, in his camelhair overcoat, looked like a respectable citizen who was being taken away by mistake, and would shortly be released with apologies. Fred swaggered. The Clerk tensed every nerve in his body.

It was *the* classic case. Maigret had always claimed that, but for chance, fifty per cent. of criminals would escape punishment, and, but for informers, the other fifty per cent would remain free.

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This gave the impression of being a witticism, especially when he rolled it out in his fine gruff voice. All the same, an informer had played a part in it, and then chance had led him to notice the yellow Duchemin removal van. However, that still left a good fraction of professional skill and knowledge of people, and even what is called flair, to play their part, too.

At three in the afternoon, the Browning was found on the roof, where it had, in fact, been thrown out through the skylight.

At half past three the Clerk broke down and confessed, and Christiani, after giving the address of an eminent lawyer, said, "This will get me six months!"

Maigret, without looking at him, said with a sigh, "And that truncheon of yours only cost *me* two teeth . . ."

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Translated by J. E. Malcolm

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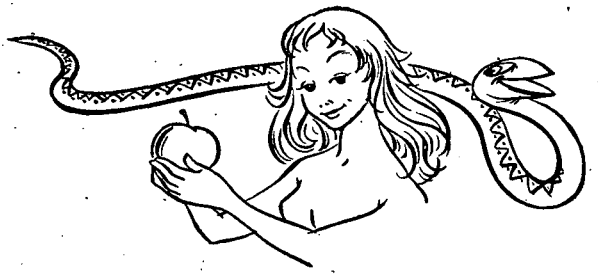

Eve and All That

You lads who pick flowers here . . . you better run away. A cold snake lurks in the grass.

VIRGIL

Naked Truth

Some girls I know would rather they
Were beautiful than clever,
But beauty's brief, I always say,
While wisdom lasts for ever;
And that's the reason I respeck
My man-friend in the City
Who loves me for my intelleck
And not because I'm pretty.

A. P. HERBERT, *I'm so Glad he Loves me for my Brains*

It Just Goes to Show

" Help yo'self," says de Lawd. " Put up all de blackberries you want. And peaches too. And plums, ef'n you and Adam likes 'em. Hit ain't but one thing which I don't want you to tech, and dat's de apple orchard. 'Cause from de news I yars, apples is kind of scarce and they ought to bring a good price next fall . . ."

Well, hit jest goes to show you. Eve didn't like apples and Adam didn't too. But no quicker do de Lawd wawk on down de road do Eve see a great big highland moccasin crawlin' long twarg her.

" Look at dat scound'el," says Eve, and she pick up a rock . . . Eve was all right, but she was a woman. And hit ain't never

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yit been a woman which could throw straight. So Eve missed de snake and hit de apple tree. And down come a big red apple, right in front of her.

"Well, I be doggone!" she say. "Look at dat apple!" So she stood and looked at hit a long time. "I didn't aim to knock hit down," she say, "but hit's down, now, and I can't put hit back . . ." So she tuck a bite.

"Don't taste like much," she say. "I wonder do Adam want to eat hit?" So she tuck de apple out to whar Adam was plowin' de cawn, and give hit to him.

"I don't like apples, gal," say Adam. "Whyn't you give me somethin' I like?"

"Cou'se you don't like apples," say Eve. "You don't never like nothin' I gives you. You got to think of hit yo-self before you likes hit," and Eve bludders up and commences to cry.

"Aw, don't cry, sugar," say Adam. "I was jest funnin' wid you. I like apples. Give me a bite."

"Nawp," say Eve. "You's jest mean, dat's what you is. You treats me mean 'cause I ain't nothin' but a poor little weak woman and you's a big, stout man. I ain't gonter give you nothin'."

"Aw, honey, don't tawk like dat," say Adam. "Dat ain't de way hit is, a-tall. I was jest playin' wid you. Give me a bite of apple and I buys you a new dress."

Well, when a man go to tawkin' new dresses to a woman he gonter git some action. So Eve dry up her cryin' and Adam et de apple and got her de dress . . .

ROARK BRADFORD, *Eve and that Snake*

Too Late

If one of thy two loves be wroth
And cry: "Thou shalt not love us both,
Take one or t'other!," O then choose
Him that can nothing thee refuse!
Only a rogue would tear a part,
How small soever, from thy heart;
As Adam sought to plunder Eve's
(What time they clad themselves in leaves),
Conjuring her to make an end
Of dalliance with her cursèd friend—
Too late, now she had learned to tell
False love from true, and ill from well.

ROBERT GRAVES, *With the Gift of a Ring*

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Success Story

Myra drew her feet out from under her and put them on the floor and sat up straight. She had black ballet shoes on with little gold stars on the toes. She stood up and moved across the room in front of me to show me how gracefully she could walk. I thought as I watched her that she probably had little gold stars instead of nipples.

"Take me out to dinner, darling," she said to Ned, turning on her husky voice to show what a fine wife she was going to be to him, with everything laid on. "And tell that fat man over there that he can come with us."

In reply he looked—I can't say deep into her eyes, because there wasn't anything deep about Myra's eyes. They were shallow. Anyway, he looked shallow into her eyes, registering strong-prospective-husband emotion, and then turned to me.

"Where would you like to eat, Joe?"

Something malicious prompted me to say, "I'm sick of restaurants. I'd like some home cooking. Let's stay here and Myra can go into the kitchen and cook us a nice little meal."

She laughed daintily, the sort of laugh a budgerigar would give if it could laugh, and stood still for Ned to help her into her fur coat. She didn't even bother to say that she never did any cooking.

"I think I know a good place, if you don't mind leaving the choice to me," said Ned, smiling his capable astute money-man's smile. He held the door open for Myra; she shimmered out . . .

They suit one another, I thought. And look at him preening himself. He's landed at the bottom of a ladder and gone up two dozen places and missed a lot of snakes . . .

JOHN WAIN, *The Contenders*

Cider-press?

When Eve upon the first of men
The apple pressed with specious cant,
O what a thousand pities then
That Adam was not Adam-ant!

THOMAS MOORE, *Adam and Eve*

Frankly Speaking

What you have told us is all very good. It is indeed bad to eat apples. It is better to make them all into cider.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

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PLATOON OF DOGS

Jim knew that at a word
the dog would have torn the man to pieces

BY FRANCIS PRICE

IT was Cappy who first told Jim about the dogs. Cappy—Tony Capriol—was the Intelligence Officer, and odd bits of information such as this were constantly straggling through to him from one or another of the companies.

"F Company discovered them yesterday," he said, "in a forest by the river at the south edge of their area. It seems darned odd."

Jim Maitland grinned and shook his head in seeming bewilderment, an old habit which no one who knew him took seriously. "I knew they had them," he said, "but I've never seen any of them. We'd better take a look this afternoon."

"I thought you'd want to," Cappy said. "So do I."

Major Maitland was Operations Officer, and he and Cappy shared the almost unique distinction of having been together in the same jobs and the same outfit all the way from Normandy to where they were now, mopping up an area much too large for an understrength infantry battalion, on the banks of the Elbe about forty miles west of Berlin, with the war in Europe just two days over.

That afternoon they took Harman, the C.O.'s driver, and his jeep, and went down to F Company's area to see about the dogs.

The place where they found them was a wooded spot by the river. It had apparently been planted a good many years before, with a variety of high-branched, long-needled pine. The trees stood in orderly rows, widely spaced at the root to provide room for the spiny network of branches above. The sun, hard and clear on the road, cast only a pale green light in here, and they had the curious impression of being under water.

The jeep slid to a stop on the carpet of pine needle, and for a moment they sat quite still. Then Cappy realised, almost with a sense of shock, that his nostrils were dilated, but not against the scent of pine.

"What is it?" he murmured.

"It's hunger," Jim said. "You can smell it."

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But as yet they hadn't even seen the dogs.

Harman announced firmly that he was staying with the jeep, which was where he belonged in any case, so Jim and Cappy got out and walked into the wood. They had moved only a few yards when a figure detached itself from one of the trees and approached them, limping slightly on his left leg. He wore a very carefully tailored uniform of a first-lieutenant in the Wehrmacht. Automatically Cappy's hand went to his gun, but then he remembered where they were and what day it was, and realised that the man was unarmed.

They had both halted involuntarily, and when the German was a few paces from them he also stopped. They could see his heels come together, but instead of the desired click there was just a gentle swish of pine needle. He smiled faintly, as if registering the futility of the whole military system, and bowed towards them. He was almost as tall as Jim and solidly built, with a lean, tanned face, dominated by a pair of startlingly pale eyes, which were fixed on them with what, Jim reflected, seemed to be the expression of the entire German people in that spring of 1945—a mixture of servility and arrogance.

"Good afternoon, Major," he said, addressing himself to Jim as the senior officer. "I have been wondering when I might expect another, more official visit. Allow me to introduce myself. Oberleutnant Hans Richter, late of the 67th Panzergrenadiers, but now—" he slapped his leg mockingly— "thanks to your extraordinarily accurate artillery, commander-in-chief of this élite group."

He had spoken in German, though for some reason Jim was certain he could easily have expressed himself in English. He was hoping, no doubt, that he would not be understood and could then enjoy the minor triumph of translating for his conquerors.

Jim nodded coldly. "So I understand," he said, in perfectly correct if somewhat pedagogic German. "We've come to see what it's all about."

Richter bowed again. "If you will follow me, I shall be glad to show you."

He led the way down one of the lanes between the trees, saying over his shoulder, "I must warn you, gentlemen, that the dogs are very bad-tempered. They have been chained up here for some days now, with no proper exercise and almost nothing to eat." He paused a moment, and then added as though it were an afterthought, "I was hoping you might have brought some food for them."

Since Jim had been thinking the same thing, his logical mind could not account for the irritation that flashed through him.

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" We'll talk about that later," he snapped. " In the meantime, where are the rest of the men here? "

Richter looked at him in surprise. Jim's tone had not escaped him, but he seemed honestly unaware of what he had done to provoke it. " I am sorry, Major," he said politely, " I thought the lieutenant who was here yesterday would have told you. I am quite alone here."

He gestured towards a low wooden building visible through the trees a couple of hundred yards to their right. " That's where the men were billeted when we were ordered here. My own quarters are just beyond. There were supposed to be kennels and a training area for the dogs, but the truth is no one knew what to do with us, so they just ordered us out here in the woods and forgot about us." He grinned sardonically, but there was no mistaking his bitterness.

" I did what I could to preserve discipline, but in the circumstances it was impossible. Every day one or two more men would be missing, and there was nothing I could do about it. When news of the surrender reached us, the few who were still here ran away—hoping to find civilian clothes and escape from you, I suppose. So I have been alone for two days, trying to find some way to feed the dogs. There is almost nothing left."

Jim listened attentively to all this, and Cappy surveyed the neat Wehrmacht uniform. " And why didn't F Company take him in yesterday? " he asked.

Richter turned to him and for a moment Jim was sure he was about to give himself away, but he just stared blankly and then turned back to Jim. " I am sorry," he said, " but I understand only a very few words of English."

Jim repeated the question. If the man really did speak English he was a superlative actor.

Richter smiled, almost apologetically. " I have been wondering when you would ask that question. The lieutenant who was here yesterday had a sergeant with him who spoke German, so I was able to persuade him to let me stay here until someone could decide what to do about the dogs. After all, I am quite harmless here, and if I had wanted to get away I could have done it before this." He stiffened, and there was a glitter of pride in the slate blue eyes. " But I am an officer in the German Army, and I do not desert my command—even if that command is now only a platoon of dogs."

Jim nodded. It was a reasonable statement, openly made, and he told himself he had no reason not to believe it.

They emerged into an area which, although it was not really a clearing, since there were the same number of trees in the same

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orderly rows, gave the appearance of one because here the green carpet which covered the rest of the wood had been swept away, leaving a dusty circle naked to the sun. To each of perhaps fifty trees was attached a cruelly short length of metal chain, and at the end of each chain was one of the dogs.

They had known the men were coming, of course, and they were waiting, not knowing what the scent of strangers might bring. Some of them paced back and forth in a narrow arc, their ears and nostrils taut, their restive paws stirring little eddies of dust. Others sat motionless at the end of their chains, their haunches gathered tensely beneath them, their splendidly muscled forelegs set and ready for the leap which would bring them nothing but a jarring catch at the neck and an ignominious fall. A few, more seriously weakened by hunger than their fellows, still lay on the hard-packed ground, but even they were watching and listening.

The whole scene resembled some provincial arena, awaiting only the arrival of the local Caesar for the gates to be opened, the victims herded out, and the animals unleashed. But there was no air of carnival; there was no sound at all.

"They have been trained to be silent," Richter said. He walked over and put his hand on the head of a magnificent Dobermann, but aside from a momentary excited trembling in his legs the dog paid not the slightest attention to him. His unblinking eyes never swerved from their target—Jim Maitland's throat.

Jim seemed not to notice. A curious thing had happened to him as he set foot on the perimeter of this circle from which the acrid scent of hatred now rose to join with those of pine and hunger. He had lived with dogs most of his life, and he admired them. He did not love them as people profess to love animals, and he neither expected nor wanted them to love him. What he had unconsciously sought, and always found, was a mutual respect and friendship which left to each party an inviolable area of privacy and dignity, and ruled out the sort of fawning collaboration he had too often noticed between man and dog.

But it was inconceivable to him that a dog could hate without reason, and in this respect, though he may not have realised it, he was placing the dog on a higher level than the human, since he was quite prepared to admit that men could be taught to hate. He found himself now confronted with evidence of a fact he did not believe.

For a moment his eyes flicked down to the dog at Richter's side, and then he looked up again and smiled. "To be silent—and to kill." The difference was important in his mind. He knew they could be taught to kill.

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"Yes, Major," Richter said, "that is so. That is all they have ever been taught."

He glanced round at the huge circle behind him, where the dogs were becoming restive and noisy now; the battering ram of hunger breaching the wall of training. "The lieutenant yesterday considered shooting them, I think, but I could see that neither he nor his men liked the idea."

He smiled fleetingly, and as surely as if he had spoken Jim knew what he was thinking. The idea of an officer considering what his men liked or disliked amused him. "So he passed the problem on to you. That's what one always does in an army, isn't it, Major? Any problem you can't solve or don't want to solve—just pass it on to someone with more authority."

He slapped the Dobermann affectionately on the neck and walked back to where Jim and Cappy stood. "And what are you going to do, Major? Are you going to shoot them?"

"I might," Jim said, in a deliberately dispassionate tone. "I haven't decided yet. For the moment I want to have a look round. Coming, Cappy?"

"Like hell I am," Cappy said. "I'm as close to those animals as I intend to go."

"Major . . ." Richter was confused. He was a shrewd man, and he knew that Maitland's words and, more particularly, his tone of voice had been intended for him, but he was at a loss to know what they meant. Finally, all he said was, "Shall I come with you?"

Jim shrugged. "If you like. There's really just one of them I want to see."

He had, in fact, seen the dog the moment they arrived at the clearing, and his eye had been caught by the fact that he was the only mongrel in the entire group—half Dobermann and half boxer. It was not so much this, however, as the dog's curious attitude that focused Jim's attention on him.

The dog was standing in a spot which he had obviously chosen with care, since it was the only island of shade within his reach, and his stance gave it the appearance of an impregnable bastion. He seemed totally unconscious of the presence of the other animals, and interested only in the arrival of the men. And it was this that in some way he communicated instantly to Jim—he was interested, but no more than that; he was not obsessed, as the others were. Richter he dismissed with a glance, and then he surveyed Cappy gravely. When he turned to Jim and found the man's eyes regarding him, his close-clipped ears flicked slightly, but by no other sign did he betray either surprise or any heightened degree of interest.

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For just an instant they studied each other, and then the dog did an odd thing. He lay down carefully, managing to keep his entire frame in the shade, rested his massive head on his outstretched forepaws, and closed his eyes. He seemed eminently satisfied with the results of his inquisition.

The tree to which he was chained was at some distance from the outer ring of the circle, and despite Richter's stream of guttural commands Jim's progress towards him was punctuated by more than one fruitless, snarling leap. By the time they reached his side the dog was standing again and Jim felt quite certain that he had known they were coming to him.

He had the sleek, glossy hide common to both Dobermann and boxer, and in his frame the long, fine bones of the one were neatly coupled with the massive muscles of the other. It was in his head, where the slender muzzle of the Dobermann had given way to a pugnacious squareness, that the boxer was predominant. His colour was the rich, deep brown of fine brandy. Mongrel or no mongrel, he was a splendid animal.

"I want that dog," Jim said quietly.

Richter looked at him in astonishment. "But, Major—these dogs—you said yourself . . ."

Jim gestured impatiently. "I know about the dogs, and I know what I said; but I want this one." He started towards the tree to unhook the chain.

Until now the dog had remained motionless, simply watching. Even at this distance he could accomplish nothing by leaping against the chain, and he knew it. But as the new man passed by him, the back of his leg was within easy reach, and with ferocious suddenness the animal lunged.

The steel springs of his legs had not yet been fully released and his open jaw was still inches from the khaki cloth above the heavy boot when the flat of Jim's hand caught him on the side of his head and he found himself lying on his back in the dust. It was more or less what he had expected.

He got deliberately to his feet, and once again looked into the eyes of the man. He saw neither fear nor anger, and he knew that the man would not find them in him. He sat down comfortably, waiting for the next move. He would leave it to the man to decide whether, or when, he might try again. For his part, he had already decided.

Richter's voice now held a thinly veiled note of contempt. "If you really want one of the dogs, Major, I'll find you a good pure-bred Dobermann, or a shepherd. That one is just a mongrel. He could never be properly trained."

Jim ignored him, and unhooked the chain, looping it round

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his hand. "Now, my friend," he said, "you are coming with me."

Without an instant's hesitation the dog started off beside him. Richter could do nothing but follow.

Cappy had his pistol in his hand and he waved it at the dog. "What the devil do you think you're doing?" he demanded.

"I'm taking him with me," Jim said. "I like him."

Cappy shook his head disgustedly. "You must be crazy. I damn near shot him back there."

Jim laughed. "Knowing something about your aim with that thing, I'm glad you didn't try."

Richter looked from one to the other, and then at the dog, and a sardonic smile twisted the corners of his mouth. "You're determined to take him, Major?" he said.

"Absolutely."

"Very well. I have warned you. I have some proper leashes in the office. I'll bring you one."

"Bring it to the jeep," Jim said, "and I'll tell you what I want done here."

As they started back through the woods Cappy said, "I don't trust that beast, even on a chain," and took up a position a couple of paces behind Jim and the dog. "What did you tell that guy? What are you going to do about them?"

"At the moment, I haven't a clue," Jim said, "but I wasn't going to tell him that. I don't like that man." He eyed the dog speculatively. "I don't think he does either, and he knows him better than I do."

Harman was working on the engine of the jeep, an occupation which took up every waking moment when he wasn't actually driving. As he saw them come up he closed the bonnet and looked first at the dog and then at Jim. "If he's coming with us," he said, "you're going to sit in the back seat with him." He swung on Cappy. "And you're going to sit in front with me, and keep an eye on both of them."

"Sir," Cappy said.

Harman nodded agreement to this. "Sir."

Jim winked at Cappy. "That's the kind of talk that would get him court-martialled, if not shot, by our German friend."

Harman looked at the approaching Richter suspiciously. "Why isn't he in a POW camp?"

"That's a good question," Cappy said.

Richter handed Jim a short, strong leather leash, but said nothing. He seemed just to be waiting for orders, and for a moment Jim was tempted to tell him to get in the jeep, but he didn't like the idea of leaving the dogs alone until he could find a

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solution. "I'll send down some food for the dogs," he said. "I want you to stay with them for the time being."

Richter bowed slightly again and stood watching them as they drove away. His pale blue eyes were thoughtful.

Sitting next to Jim in the jeep the dog felt strangely happy. Perhaps it was just the sense of motion and the wind in his face again, or the instinct that told him there would be food at the end of this journey, but it seemed to him that it was something more important than this. It was something to do with the scents that filled the air.

When he was first brought to the place in the woods he had recognised the scent immediately, though it had been a long time since it was a part of every breath he drew. And occasionally—usually at night, when there was no movement about him and the air was fresh, another scent had come that caused him to lie awake in the dark, his nostrils twitching. He had never quite succeeded in placing it, because the images it called up were too confused, but now, sitting in the jeep, looking out at the river, and smelling it, strong and clear, he knew. It was because of the children that he had been confused. The woods were one thing—they belonged to the man, and that was a simple thing, and sure. But the water place belonged to the children, and because he had almost forgotten their scent he hadn't remembered this other one until he saw the river.

The jeep turned off the road and after a minute it stopped in a place that caused a rising sense of excitement to surge through him. The house where he had lived with the man and the children was a house like this one, filled with the scents of other animals and of the things that came from the fields in wagons pulled by the big, stolid horses. He was certain now that the man and the children could not be far away. He could find them if he had the chance.

Forgetting the leash and the man at his side, wanting to be free of the jeep, to run and search, he leapt forward. His forepaws struck the man in front of him just as the collar pulled him back, but before he fell he saw the man turn, and he saw the look on his face and the object in his hand. He knew what it was and he came to his feet with his teeth bared and an angry snarl forming in his chest, but the man beside him had already reached out and seized the other's arm and pushed it up towards the sky.

He stood there, trembling a little, watching the man in front.

"Pack it up, Cappy," Jim said sharply. "The dog didn't mean anything. He just wanted to get out. He's hungry and he smells food."

Cappy put the gun away slowly, but he didn't take his eyes

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from the dog. " O.K., O.K.," he said, " but you'd better keep that dog away from me, I'm warning you. I don't like him." He got out and walked stiffly away.

Jim sighed, and put his hand on the dog's head, not thinking until after he had done it that it was the first time he had touched him since knocking him off his feet.

" Come on," he said, " and we'll get you something to eat."

Late that afternoon he was summoned to a meeting at the Regimental Command Post. He would have liked to take the dog with him, but since this was impossible he was forced to shut him up in his room.

" He'll be perfectly all right there," he said to Cappy, " as long as no one bothers him. I put a KEEP OUT sign on the door."

" They intend to transfer the rest of them to Wittenberge tomorrow," Cappy said, " so I might just run down there later and pick up that Richter character. I don't know why he bothers me, but he does."

Jim nodded. " I know what you mean. If I should be late getting back, will you take the dog something to eat? "

" And lose an arm in the process? Like hell I will."

Jim paused, with his hand on the doorknob, and stared at Cappy thoughtfully. This wasn't like him. It was difficult to believe that he was actually afraid of the dog, but how else could this unreasoning dislike be explained? " Never mind," he said. " I'll take care of it myself."

He was late getting back, because the C.O. had insisted that they stay for dinner, so he went straight to the kitchen to get something for the dog. When he found the kitchen deserted he remembered that they were showing Judy Garland in *Meet Me in St. Louis* in the big barn of the farmhouse.

He dumped the contents of a couple of tins of rations into a bowl and started back across the courtyard towards his room in the wing of the main house. There was no one in sight anywhere. Even Harman had deserted his beloved jeep and gone to the barn. For no reason that he could ascertain, Jim felt uneasy. It was a kind of nervous tension in the pit of his stomach; he had experienced it often in the past months and had come to believe that it was a pretty accurate warning that something was about to happen. And as soon as he entered the house he knew he was right. The door to his room was standing open, and there was no sign of the dog.

He swore softly to himself. " If it was Cappy, I'll kill him."

He went quickly down the corridor to Cappy's room, but here too the door was open, and Cappy wasn't there. For an angry

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moment he considered going over to the barn and holding up the film until he found out what had happened, but he abandoned the idea almost immediately. It would serve no purpose, except to make a fool of himself. The dog was gone.

Outside, the spring twilight was already fading, and it would soon be dark. The jeep was still standing in the courtyard where Harman had left it, but there was no point in driving aimlessly about at night, looking for a dog. He was on his way to the office, trying to put the matter out of his mind, when he thought about the woods. The dog had probably gone directly back there. Not, lord knows, that he would have any reason to return to that place of hunger and imprisonment at the end of a chain, but he had, after all, been thoroughly trained.

Jim ran down the steps and got into the jeep. By rights he should go and fetch Harman, but it didn't matter. He would be back before the film was over.

By the time he pulled up in the same spot where they had parked earlier that day the high branches had blotted out what little light the sky still held, and the forest was completely black. There was no light to be seen in the German barracks, but Richter had said his quarters were beyond that building, so perhaps he would not be able to see a light in there from where he sat—or perhaps Cappy had actually come back and taken him away.

He switched on the headlights to illuminate the path, and started towards the clearing. If Richter had not been there to chain him up again the dog would certainly not have stayed, but as he had come this far he might as well look. He was vaguely surprised that there had been no sound from the dogs when the lights went on, but the reason was apparent as soon as he reached the edge of the clearing. They were gone.

The lengths of chain still dangled from the trees, but the dogs were no longer there. Jim frowned. Surely Cappy had said that they were to be picked up tomorrow, not today? Abruptly he was conscious again of the tension in his stomach. He turned quickly and started back towards the jeep.

He was only a matter of yards from it, shielding his eyes from the glare, when there was a little click and the headlights went out. Momentarily blinded, he did not at first see the figure standing beside the jeep, but he heard the voice, speaking perfect English with a heavy German accent.

"That will be far enough, Major," Richter said.

In his right hand Jim could now see the gleaming, blue-black muzzle of a Luger, and round his left wrist was the loop of a short leash which held back the straining weight of a Dobermann.

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Richter's thumb and forefinger rested lightly on the spring catch at the collar. He could release it with a flick of his thumb, and if he did the dog would be at Jim's throat in a single leap.

" I thought when I saw your dog again, that you would come back," Richter said. " That's why I waited. Now, Major, if you will just put down that gun on the ground here—and don't try to be heroic. You would be dead before you could take aim."

Reflecting grimly that the German knew what he was talking about, Jim did as he was told. For the moment, at least, there was nothing else to do. It was clear from what Richter had said that this was no spur-of-the-moment attempt; it was a carefully worked out plan. He had seen Jim coming, and he was waiting for him. He was tempted to curse himself for not having paid more attention to his earlier suspicions, but he had long since learnt the futility of thinking back to what he might have done. If he could just keep Richter talking now, he would find some way . . .

" The dog did come back, then? " he said, striving to keep his voice on a flat, conversational level.

" Yes, he came back. I saw him an hour or so ago on the road, just as I was on the point of abandoning my original plan and leaving here on foot. I couldn't drive the captain's jeep, in civilian clothes, and his uniform was quite useless to me. He is far too small."

Jim was startled. " The captain's jeep? "

Richter seemed to be enjoying himself. " The little man who was with you this afternoon. He came not long after your men with the food had left. For a moment I thought it was going to be difficult, as I had just finished releasing the dogs, but fortunately he came alone, like yourself, and he didn't even bother to look. I simply asked him if I could fetch some of my kit from my quarters, and . . ." He shrugged. " You English are really hopelessly naïve, Major."

" Is he dead? " Jim demanded.

" No, he isn't. I imagine he has a rather bad headache, but he isn't dead. You know, Major, it's odd the way things work out. I tried to prevent you from taking that dog, but now I'm extremely glad you did. If I hadn't seen him, and decided to take the risk of waiting for you, I would have made a very dangerous mistake. I had no intention of killing the captain—or you, either—until just a few minutes ago, when I realised that I would have to. In a moment of false pride this afternoon I gave you my correct name and unit. Alive, you would have been able to obtain photographs and fingerprints, and I might have been traced. A dangerous thing, pride."

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"And you waited for me because you wanted my uniform?"

"Perfectly correct, Major. It should fit me very well, and it is vital to the success of the first part of my plan. That's why I didn't shoot you as you came up the path. I should naturally prefer to have it without smoke-rimmed holes, or—" he gestured towards the dog— "the unavoidable disorder which Rupert here would cause. But we have wasted enough time now, Major. Take off your clothes."

Jim hesitated for only a moment. He had no intention of simply handing Richter his uniform and allowing himself to be shot, but he still had to play for time. Perhaps in taking off his boots . . . In any event, he thought, almost cheerfully, he would make sure that the uniform would not be wearable. He began to unbutton his tunic, slowly.

"You'll never get away with it," he said. "With that accent, the first sentries you see will know you're a fake."

"I won't be seeing any sentries," Richter said pleasantly. "I shall need the uniform and the jeep just long enough to make a call at an old manor house about twenty miles down the road—a very rich manor house, Major, which your troops have somehow neglected. An English officer will have no difficulty getting in, and what happens will be put down as just another case of looting. Shortly after I will run the jeep into the river, and by daybreak I will be in civilian clothes, far from here. Rather clever, don't you—" He stopped abruptly, listening.

Jim had heard it too, a split second before, and although he was never able to explain how, he had known instinctively what it was, and he was ready. When the massive brown form hurtled past him towards the Dobermann, he sprang. The Dobermann barked once, frantically, and leapt against the leash which still held him, and then the other dog was on top of him.

At the same moment Jim's hands went round the startled Richter's throat, and smashed his head against the side of the jeep. The Luger clattered briefly against the metal and fell to the ground.

It was over in less than a minute. The strong boxer teeth had gone clear through the Dobermann's neck, and now the sleek black form lay twitching gently in the pine needle, streaming blood from the throat. But the dog had already forgotten him. He was standing motionless above the prostrate Richter, and Jim knew that at a word from him he would have torn the man to pieces.

"No, my friend," he said softly. "I want him just the way he is."

He took a length of rope from the tool compartment, and began

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tying Richter's hands behind him. The rope was too heavy for the purpose, and it was awkward work. Richter came to before he had finished.

Jim grinned at him. "It's odd the way things work out," he said.

Richter glared at the dog angrily. "A mongrel! A damned mongrel! I should have shot him long ago!"

Jim stood up and began to button his tunic. "Well, you were right about one thing. You said he could never be properly trained, and apparently he couldn't—not to your definition, at least." He put a hand on the dog's head and grinned at Richter again.

"I think he must be part English, too. He seems to be hopelessly naïve."

He gathered up the Luger and his own gun and started towards Richter's quarters to find Cappy. He had thought perhaps the dog would follow him, but when he looked back he was still standing beside the jeep. Jim shook his head, and this time there was a core of genuine bewilderment in the old habit. It *was* odd. Half an hour ago he had been ready to kill Cappy for letting the dog escape, and now . . .

He realised that the dog was watching him, and then he saw him lift his head to the breeze from the river and he remembered the way he had sat in the jeep, never taking his eyes from the water, and his excitement when they had come to the farmhouse.

"It's all right, friend," he murmured. "Go ahead. Go on home." The words came out, seemingly of their own volition, but as soon as they were spoken he knew that they were right.

And it was almost as if the dog had heard him, because his head came down and he looked at Jim for a moment, steadily, before turning and trotting off towards the road. Just once he paused and looked back, and then, with a curious little yelp of freedom, he turned again, and ran straight ahead.

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Across. 1, *Man overboard.* 9, *Quantum.* 10, *Bull pen.* 11, *Arid.* 12, *Pinch.* 13, *Ting.* 16, *Eyesore.* 17, *Adamant.* 18, *Earnest.* 21, *Celeste.* 23, *Side.* 24, *Fiend.* 25, *Fair.* 28, *Realism.* 29, *Elision.* 30, *Stitch in time.*

Down. 1, *Moabite.* 2, *Note.* 3, *Vampire.* 4, *Rebecca.* 5, *Oils.* 6, *Replica.* 7, *Square measure.* 8, *Knights-errant.* 14, *Tower.* 15, *Dally.* 19, *Redraft.* 20, *Triumph.* 21, *Canteen.* 22, *Seawife.* 26, *Wilt.* 27, *Mimi.*

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FIGHTING

HE CAME back like royalty. The railway station stuffed with people like a can of beans; the train crying in from around the mountain like the banshee, clattering to a stop at the platform between the milkchurns and the crates of hens. And then Michael himself, red head shining, half stunned at the welcome, and yet lifting with it, full of joy and pride and wonder, standing in the open doorway of the carriage like a king in his glory.

"Michael!" whispered Brid beside me, and I put a hand on her arm to steady her as the crowd went forward like a rugger scrum, photographers' bulbs flashing like fireworks, dogs yelping, men shouting, the train whistle blasting, and the brass band trying to play the *Bold Fenian Men*.

"Speech!" yelled Tim Lawlor who has the big bar. "Speech from the champ!" And little Michael Raftery, wee Mick the shtrap, the small, snotty-nosed ruffian that no one would have picked out of a ditch if he'd been dead in it ten years ago, standing

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there with the tears running down his thin face, his hands held out beseeching, and his mouth not able to speak.

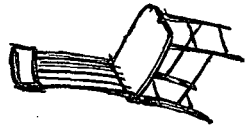
" It's good to be back," he stammered out at last, and with that there was another surge forward of the crowd, and he went shoulder high like a cork on a wave. *See, the Conquering Hero Comes!* the band blared, and Brid and I were shoved sideways into the parcel office.

" Mike! " Brid called, but he didn't see us, and by the time we'd picked ourselves out from a heap of parcels and seed sacks he was gone, and the crowd with him. Which had its own particular irony. Brid, that he was as good as engaged to, and me, her father, who'd been about the one person in Killaragh who had ever dropped him a kind word when he lived there before.

Ten years ago almost to the month he'd gone away, and I don't suppose anyone noticed for a fortnight after. An unwashed brat out of the jumble of riverside cabins at the dirty end of the village, with a father in and out of gaol and the staggering horrors. Who'd miss him?

After he disappeared we didn't hear a whisper of him for seven years. It was Brid who ran into him again. Across in Birmingham. She was working in a hotel because a passion for independence had come on her at that time, and he was delivering milk.

MAD



By BRIAN CLEEVE

She wrote and mentioned casually that she'd met a lad from Killaragh. No more than that. But the next letter called him Michael, and the letters after that Mike. And pretty soon they had a kind of breathlessness in them when they described his doings. How he'd been a boxing champion of the British army when he was doing his National Service. How he was turning professional.

He's got fans, now, she wrote another time. *You should hear them when he comes down the aisle to the ring. They all sit in one part of the stadium and they start to chant when they see him, " Red Mick, Red Mick." Oh, I could die with pride when I hear it.*

I remember smiling over that letter. Little small Brid dying with pride over a fellow. I suppose I thought of her still as about

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fourteen, with her black hair in tangles down her back and her hands dirty. The next letter had a whole long column from a London paper enclosed with it.

YOUNG CHALLENGER FOR LIGHTWEIGHT CROWN, it was headed, and after that I didn't need Brid's letters to keep me up to date about Michael Raftery. Our own papers discovered him.

KILLARAGH BOY IN CHAMPIONSHIP-BOUT ELIMINATOR. And the fellows in Lawlor's starting to remember how they'd always known there was a bit of difference about young Mick.

"Hell and damnation!" Tim Lawlor used to say, shadow-boxing behind his counter. "Wasn't I the first man in this parish that showed that little shrimp what class of thing a straight left was?" and he'd let fly with a right swing in a way to imperil any pint pot within six feet of him.

And Lenehan, and Oweny Madigan, and all the rest that had never known he existed except maybe to kick his britches as he scuttled by. Oh, it's a great changer of history to become a hero. And the night of the British championship fight against Hugh Molsom the holder. All of us round the radio down in Lawlor's private room, with a bottle of whisky on the table, and the little brown radio sitting like a hunched-up wee man on the dresser talking to us in a whisper, round after round, against the roaring of the crowd.

I think the Molsom fellow only won one round, somewhere about the middle of the fight. Michael must have got careless for a second, and ran into a roundhouse clout from Molsom that sent him to the floor for a count of nine, and seemed to leave him pretty groggy. He took a lot of punishment before the end of that round, and from what I could judge he spent the next few rounds avoiding taking any more.

But even so there wasn't any doubt at the last bell who had won, and I walked back to the shop under the stars wondering how Brid must be feeling in this night of triumph, and half dreading the next news I'd get from her. A champion is a very fine thing, no doubt, but a boxer for a son-in-law . . .

And then, just after that, my wife Mary took sick, and I had to write to Brid to ask her to come home and help me. I half doubted whether she'd come at all. But she's a good girl, and she came the moment I asked her, nursing her mother and helping in the shop without a word of complaint. Although I knew from the way she waited on his letters and scoured through the papers what direction her heart was lying.

And if his letters were few and short, the papers made up for it. *The White Hope*, some of them were calling him. *At last—a boxer*, another one said. They were beginning to talk of his

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fight with Molsom as a masterpiece of strategy, except for one or two doubters. And when Michael beat the European champion, and defended his crown twice in three months, even the doubters stopped doubting. WORLD TITLE FIGHT FOR RAFTERY? they began asking. And then, WORLD TITLE FIGHT IN JUNE?

In April Michael's manager signed the contract. HARNEKER-RAFTERY FIGHT FOR LONDON IN SEPTEMBER, the sports pages boasted. And you had to read to the bottom of the columns to find the whispers of warning. *Harneker is a killer*, one paper said. *Even by American standards he's a killer. A pocket Louis. If Raftery can keep away from him in the early rounds . . .*

And now it was July, and Michael was home for a hero's welcome, and a fortnight's rest before his final training. I left Brid in the shop and went on to Lawlor's. Michael was besieged at the counter, a glass of whisky in his hand and his face red as his hair with the heat and the laughter and the back-slapping. A little slim boy, like a coiled spring of steel. Eyes pale blue. Freckles under the skin like golden powder.

Lenehan was pretending to spar with him, and Oweny Madigan was practically crying down his neck with the emotion. I saw his mother there and one of his sisters, looking lost in what to them must be the grandeur of Lawlor's.

As soon as he saw me shoving in, Michael waved to me and started working his way over. "It's good to see you again," he said. "You were always a friend to me."

"You've a parcel of friends now," I said. He made a face.

"Here's to being back," he said, and drained his whisky.

"Is that good for training?" I asked for the sake of something to say, and saw to my astonishment a curious shadow flicker across his eyes. Almost a hunted look.

"I was at the station," I said, still wondering about that shadow.

"Brid?" he said, and nodded as if he knew what was in my mind. "I'm sorry I missed her," he said shamefacedly, "but—all this—" He waved his hand round the tumult in the bar. "I didn't guess—it sort of knocked me for a loop. I've hardly drawn breath since."

I waited while he disentangled Oweny from his neck and pushed away another three glasses of whisky being offered him. "I'll come with you now."

It took main force to get out of the bar, and more to keep half a dozen of them from following us, but at last we were alone. I looked sideways at his face in the late sunlight, trying to sum him up. He walked almost as if he was dancing, but with a terrible intensity behind it, in it, the way any minute he might explode.

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His face too. Nerves tight as wires under the fine-drawn skin. Good bone there. A wide forehead.

Something in my heart eased a little, looking at him. And something else tightened. He might not be so bad for Brid after all. But again, he might be very bad for himself. Not an easy face. We walked in silence until we turned into the shop.

Brid was there behind the counter, and her head came up as Michael entered, and I saw her eyes. I knew then that it didn't matter a tinker's damn what I thought. This was her man. A blush like a flame burning under her skin, and her eyes shining, and her mouth like a full rose in a sudden shaft of sunlight. "Mike," she breathed, and leaned towards him, and I had to go out of the shop because I didn't belong there for that minute.

I walked ten miles over the hills that evening and aged ten years, and came back full of resignation to give them my blessing. To find them sitting on either side of the little parlour fireplace with their faces white and strained and their eyes looking as if the world had ended.

"What's the matter?" I said. It was foolish to pretend that there was nothing to ask about.

"He's not going back," Brid said flatly.

Michael shifted on his chair, got up, took two light swift steps across the little room, drove a left and a right to within a fraction of an inch of the wallpaper, as if he wanted to punch his fists through the wall.

"That's right," he said. "I thought Brid would be glad."

I knew he'd thought nothing of the kind from the way he said it. He kept his face away from her, rolling his shoulders, moving his head as if he was swaying in the ring, looking at neither of us. Brid pressed her hands backwards over her temples, straining the hair flat and black against her head, drawing a long tight drag of breath into her throat. I could see they'd been over this and over, until there was nothing new to say.

"Well, that's great news," I said heartily, or tried to. "I expect you have a bit of money put by and reckon it's enough?"

He spun on me with his mouth tight and his eyes like chips of ice. "That's right," he said. "Enough for what I want. I'm going to start a shop. Sweets and groceries, and maybe an off-licence one day. Like you. And when some poor kid comes to the door I'll give him a screw of sweets. Like you. That's what I've been fighting for. That bit of money to stand behind my own counter—"

He talked like fighting, jabbing the words out. At me. But really at Brid. And she sat listening. Or maybe not listening,

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because he must have said this over and over again in the past few hours.

" Damn, damn, damn," he hissed at her, as if she'd spoken. He smacked one fist softly into the open palm of the other hand, hunched his shoulders. He moved on the worn square of carpet like a caged leopard. " I thought you'd be glad. Have me home for good. Not busted up or anything."

He put up a hand, touched his still straight nose, his eyebrows, his cheekbones, as if reassuring himself. " What does anyone fight for except for money? " He spun on her. " Champion of the British Isles and Europe. Isn't that enough? Brid, Brid," he said, almost pathetic suddenly, spreading his hands in front of her.

" Then why did you sign for this next fight? " she said in a tight voice. " Can't you see what people will say? Everyone. Even those down in Lawlor's."

" Don't say it," he whispered warningly. " Don't say it."

Mary came in then with the tea, and no one said anything any more, about that at least. But it was all as stiff and slippery as ice on a road, and half an hour after the meal was cleared Michael went off back to Lawlor's. His mother's cabin hadn't a room that she'd put him in, now he'd grown so fine, and he was lodging with Lawlor for the fortnight.

Brid and I walked back a piece of the road with him. It was Brid who insisted I come. We watched him go off up the last

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bit of the road, not turning back to look at us or wave.

"He's afraid," said Brid bitterly, and turned to me, her face white and savage in the half darkness.

"Brid!" I whispered. It was as if I didn't know her any more. A stranger. A tall woman with her own mind, her own ways.

"Maybe he has the right to be afraid," I said. "Hasn't he done enough?"

"No," she said harshly. And then her dark head was against my chest, and her arms were round me. "Oh, I love him so," she whispered. "He mustn't be afraid. It's not for me I care. It's for himself. He's come so far. He has to finish the road. Just this one last fight and then he can throw the whole thing over the wall and I'll live with him in a cave if we need to. But he mustn't have been afraid."

I lifted her face with my hand. "Everyone's afraid at times," I said.

"I know. But they mustn't show it. And specially not him. He's come so far," she whispered. "Up from the cabins. It's like walking a tightrope. He just has one more step to take. If he doesn't take it he'll fall. Back and down to what his father was."

"How do you know so much?" I said wonderingly.

"I love him," she said again, as if that explained all things. We started to walk back. "He thinks all those wasters down in Lawlor's will stick by him. That they'll all laugh at the joke he's putting over on the big men in England and America, going back on his contract. That he'll still be the Champ for them whatever he does, and that that's all that matters. He nearly hit me when I said they'd turn on him like a dog—in a day. In a second."

But for a week there was a kind of lull. There had been three or four of them left in Lawlor's when he got back there, and he'd told them straight out, pretty well daring anyone to call him a coward. No one took up the challenge to his face, and the whispers behind his back stayed whispers. He didn't come near Brid at all.

Then at the end of the week his manager came over to see how he was getting on. Apparently he'd tried to telephone Michael a couple of times from London, and Michael hadn't phoned back. Now he was here in person. A little, square-built, broken-nosed man, with eyes like flat splinters of slate, and no eyebrows. Smoking a cigar, and a diamond ring on each little finger. He came into the bar like an explorer pushing into the jungle.

"Well, where's my boy?" he said.

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I'd seen him getting out of the taxi that had brought him down from Dublin, heard him asking for Lawlor's pub, and guessed who he might be. I followed him into the bar and saw Michael a fraction of a second before he did. With a glass in his hand and Oweny Madigan beside him. He looked up as the door creaked open, and stiffened, and a flood of colour came up in his face like a scarlet curtain. He half made to push the whisky glass out of sight. Then he turned to face the little man boldly, and lifted the glass to his mouth.

"Have one, Jacko? I didn't know you were coming."

"I reckon you didn't. D'you call slugging whisky 'resting'? And what the hell do you think you're doing, not phoning me back?"

Michael laughed, and I caught the note of uneasiness in his laughter. "You'll never guess, Jacko. I'm retiring."

There was a long silence. The stranger moved softly forward to the counter and faced Michael. "Have you gone crazy?"

"I've gone sensible," Michael said defiantly.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Oweny Madigan slide half a pace away from him, and it was like a symbol.

"I half guessed something like this was going to happen," the stranger said. He had a harsh, grating voice as if he spent his life breathing smoke instead of air. He put his cigar carefully on the edge of an ashtray and held up a thick finger for Lawlor to come and serve him. "Double Scotch," he said. "Now, my Irish rose. You want to go yellow, O.K. But not while you're my boy, do you hear?" He tapped his breast pocket. "Not while I have your signature along with mine on a contract."

Michael moved so fast I couldn't see it. Only the result. The stranger's lapels in his two fists. Michael half lifting him off his feet.

"You take that back, Jacko. No one calls me yellow."

"No?" said Jacko. His right hand moved. It didn't seem very fast. He just picked up the still-burning cigar and crushed it between Michael's eyes. Michael screamed and staggered back. I saw Oweny Madigan scuttle out of his way. Michael landed up against the wall, and leaned there, wiping his streaming eyes, his mouth working.

"I always thought you had a yellow streak," Jacko said dispassionately. "Just another Irish dancer. That time with Molsom. Just one round he cut loose and hurt you, and you clammed up like a rose in the frost. Now listen to me, I'm not wasting time on you. You get back to London the day we fixed, and we'll forget about it. But if you don't come back—" he stubbed the fragments of his cigar into the ashtray, pulled

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another one out of his breast pocket—" I'll plaster your yellow liver over every sports page in London, and I'll sue you for every cent you've got. I'll get it, too. That contract of mine is boiler-plated."

He swallowed his whisky, and moved out of the bar, as square and unruffled and quiet as when he came. Michael lay against the wall, watching him go. I saw Lawlor and Oweny Madigan exchange a look. The door swung behind the stranger.

" To hell with his bloody contract," Michael said savagely. " Tim, give me another drink." Lawlor moved to obey. I caught Michael's arm.

" Have it later," I said. " I want to talk with you now."

" You too? " he said.

I could see he'd had more than a few that day. But he came with me.

I turned away from the village and up on to the hillside. We must have gone half a mile before I found the words I wanted. The wind was blowing, and there was a smell of heather and cut turf from the bog.

" You've got to go back."

" I'll die first," he said sullenly. " What the hell does he think I am? His slave? "

" It's nothing to do with him," I said. " Not even with Brid. Nor the money. It's you."

He stood still and looked at me challengingly. " You think I'm yellow too? "

" Everyone's yellow," I said. " The first thing is to admit it. Then get over it."

" Get over it! " he spat. " Do you know what it's like in there? All alone under the lights. Five thousand faces watching you out of the dark. Voices yelling, ' Kill him, kill him.' But you don't hear anything. You can't see anything. Only the other man's gloves. They look so big. Lord, they look big."

Suddenly he gripped my coat the way he gripped the stranger's, but this time his face was different. Almost crying. " Can you understand? Haven't I done enough? Look! " He let go of me with one hand, pointed down to the huddle of cabins below the hill where his mother still lived. " All the way up from there."

" Only one thing can push you down there again," I said. " Yourself."

" You know so much," he snarled. " You ever been hurt? Really hurt? You double up and you think you're going to die. All you want is to die quiet, be left. But he won't leave you. He comes in and in and in, and the hurt gets worse, and your guts

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spew up out of your throat. And Brid wants me to go back to that," he said with a sudden rush of bitterness. "What does she know about it?"

"She doesn't," I said. "It's just that she knows you have to go back if you're going to respect yourself. Just this one more fight."

"One more fight. One more fight. I've seen what one more fight can do to a man. One real beating. And I've seen films of Harneker handing out that kind of beating. He's a killer." His voice had got wild.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw a shadow. Turned my head a fraction and saw that Brid was there. The wind blowing her dark hair, her face tormented, as if every word that Michael was saying, every fear that was tearing at him was tearing her. But he was looking away and didn't see her.

"I meant to get out after that Molsom fight. I knew it wasn't the game for me then. But they won't let you go. They talk and talk, and they butter you up. And there's the money, and the newspapers, and people pointing in the street and calling you Champ."

Brid had come down close to him and was standing behind his shoulders.

"I signed up for this fight because it seemed I couldn't do anything else. I couldn't tell them. Then I thought of coming back here and staying here. I didn't think there'd be any fuss waiting for me. Just that people would think I'd done pretty well for myself. And then the station—and now— Oh God, I don't know what to do."

He swung away from me, and saw Brid. "You—you heard?" he whispered.

She didn't answer. Only looked at him with her face like stone and her eyes cold as a winter sky. He took a beseeching step towards her, holding out his hands, his mouth working. "Can't you understand?" he begged.

"Yes," she said slowly. "I understand. You're your father's son."

Michael stared at her for a long uncomprehending second. A flood of scarlet swept up from his throat, seemed to blind him. He clenched his fist, half lifted it, and I stepped forward between them. Then he turned and ran. Ran and ran like a madman down the hill.

"Brid," I said when I could speak. "How could you say that to him?"

She looked at me, and I saw that she was crying. "What else could I say to him?" she said, and then she left me too, and I was

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alone on the hillside, watching Michael already small in the distance, and Brid running in another direction, her long legs flashing, her hair tossing and streaming on the wind.

That night, without a word to anyone, Michael was gone. And the whispers that had been echoing for the past days broke into the open. I saw Oweny Madigan telling the story of the stranger to a jeering, laughing circle of men in the bar. "Like a whipped cur, he was, me bould bucko of a champeen."

"Cabin trash," someone else said, and there was a rumble of agreement.

I went away and back to the shop, although I was half afraid of what I'd find. Brid was there behind the counter, staring at nothing as if she'd lost the sight from her eyes.

"Well," I said, "he's gone."

She swung on me. "Thank God," she said. And then she was in my arms and crying like the child she wasn't any longer. "It was the only way to do it," she sobbed, her voice muffled in the old brown tweed of my coat. "To shame him into going back." And then, lifting her head, "Do you—do you think will he forgive me ever?"

I pressed her head back against my heart. It was no good saying what I thought.

The next weeks were a misery. He never wrote. The papers told us that he was back and training, but someone had caught the whisper of what had happened while he was over with us, and there was a kind of running sneer in all the columns about the preparations for the fight. As if they were waiting for him to duck out of it all again.

Down in Lawlor's they talked of nothing else. The hiding he was going to get if he went into the ring. And the jeering he was going to get if he didn't.

"Well, there's one certain thing," Oweny said. "He won't be coming back here, me gracious hero. Puttin' on his airs of glory as if he was gentry, the shtrap." And I'd go back from hearing that in the bar to seeing Brid's face.

"I had to," she'd whisper over and over again, more to herself than to me. "It was the only way."

And she'd turn and ask me didn't I agree with her, didn't I know myself it was the only way. And I'd have to pretend to be sure. Until it was the night.

I couldn't bear to go down to Lawlor's for it. I didn't mean to listen in at all. And then somehow the three of us were sitting in the parlour, Mary and Brid and I, with the radio on the table and the turf fire whispering in the hearth. It was hard in that

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quietness to think of Michael, and what he would be feeling. Until I looked into Brid's distracted eyes and knew what he was feeling. Every knife prick of the terror.

The radio crackled alive, the voices whispered. "We're at the ringside, waiting for the challenger to enter . . ." All the preliminaries, the speeches, the roar as Michael came. But was I imagining it, or was there an edge to the roar, a threat? And then for Harneker. "A little Sherman tank of a man," the voice on the radio whispered carelessly. As if for flesh and blood and brain to go into a square of ropes with a Sherman tank was only an evening's pleasure.

A bell ringing. The whisper of the commentator becoming urgent. "They're coming out now. Raftery almost tall compared to Harneker. Very slenderly built. Harneker's built to the ground and not a youngster any more, but it's astonishing how fast he moves. In goes Raftery, and out again. He didn't even try to land. Just in and out, measuring—"

Then the crowd-roar. "Harneker's moving in, a short crisp jolt to Raftery's ribs, in and in, Raftery riding the punches, dancing away. Harneker after him. He's obviously heard about Raftery's speed, he's not giving him a chance to use it. Crowding him, crowding—" The crowd-roar lifted to thunder, bellowing, terrifying. "Raftery's down, he's dazed, he's on his knees." And a voice farther off in a sudden hush, ". . . four . . . five . . . six . . . seven . . ."

"Oh God, oh God," Brid was whispering, clinging to my hand, the tears running down her face. "I sent him back."

"He's up," the radio shouted. "Looking dazed still, but on his feet. Harneker's after him again like a black tiger, fists swinging, in for the kill. Raftery's down again, but too dazed to stay down . . . and again . . . and again . . ." The radio was shrieking now, crazy for blood and killing.

A bell rang, and the second voice came on. "I should think that round leaves no doubt at all about anything, eh, Jim? Harneker's round, and unless a miracle happens, Harneker's fight. I can see Jacko Feldberg talking to Raftery, looking very worried. Raftery doesn't look anything, barely conscious. I wouldn't be surprised to see the towel coming in if this goes on."

It did go on, but the towel didn't come in. Remembering Jacko Feldberg's face as he crushed his cigar between Michael's eyes, I didn't think it would. Michael was going to get the beating that he'd talked about.

I could hear the jeering in the crowd now. A voice yelling, "Dance him a jig, Raftery. Sing him a song, Lily." Four rounds. Five. Mary went out of the room so as not to hear. I

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reached forward to switch the radio off, to stop the pain. But Brid caught my wrist.

"No," she whispered bleakly. "I did this. I have to hear what I've done."

I couldn't look at her face any more. Only shut my eyes and listen to that terrible beating as it went on, round by round. And worse than the beating, the jeering and mockery that went with it. The monotonous voice of the radio whispering, "Dancing away, retreating, jabbing out his tired left hand to keep Harneker off . . . His legs are like rubber now, it's a miracle he's still on them. I don't think he knows what he's doing any more. But this is a championship fight, and the referee is quite right. It's up to Raftery's corner to stop it if they think he can't go on . . ."

And the yells from the invisible darkness, "Stand and fight, stand and fight!"

For me it wasn't Michael in there being beaten. It was Brid. She was kneeling by my chair now, her hands twisting my sleeve, her lip caught between her teeth. And for a second I saw her as if she was a stranger. The fine, thin eyebrows like black wings against the sky. The sweep of her dark hair beside her white, drawn face. She was taking a beating too. And facing it. It wasn't the worst thing in the world, what she had done. Or what she was doing. To love him. And send him back for his own sake. And listen to the terrible result without running away.

"Round nine," the radio whispered. "Harneker moving into the centre of the ring. Slower now. The fire out of him as we saw in the last two or three rounds. You can see in his face he's begging for just one chance to get Raftery in a corner where he can't run. He's the older man, of course. Ten years older than the challenger. But whatever else he's done, Raftery has shown us a masterpiece of defensive boxing in this fight. Backing away, sidestepping . . . Harneker must have delivered a dozen punches for every one that's landed. Raftery covering up, rolling with the punch—a left jab there from Raftery. It stopped Harneker for a second. There must have been quite a sting in that one.

"When Raftery does deliver, all his weight is behind it. Always on balance. A beautiful stylist, although the crowd aren't appreciating him, I'm afraid. Another left jab there. And a right cross, a lovely right cross." I could hear the urgency feathering back into the voice. And my own heart tripped a fraction until I stifled it with commonsense.

"Moving out of Harneker's range again, weaving, bobbing Raftery seems to have saved something up through these last rounds. In again with a left feint, Harneker swinging, and Raftery hit him then—a very nice, crisp punch—and again, a beautiful

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left hook to the chin . . ." Behind the whisper the crowd growling, suddenly giving tongue in one full roar, drowning the commentary.

" Harneker's down on one knee . . . the referee pushing Raftery back, beginning to count . . . Harneker up, shaking his bullet head, looking at his corner as if to reassure them that that was just an accident. *And Raftery's in*—a cracking right to Harneker's jaw as he looked away that time and a left into the stomach, left, right; left, right . . ." The crowd-roar lifting to a scream of raging ecstasy, half drowning the bell.

" Well, no doubt about that, eh, Terry? Raftery's round," and the cool English voices discussing, praising, analysing.

The bell jangling again. The hunched, urgent whisper coming, " Raftery moving out to the centre, feinting, swaying, Harneker swinging, he missed there, Raftery driving in a long left, moving out, changing stance to come in with his right. Harneker after him, head sunk in his thick brown shoulders, wiping away the blood from his nose, ploughing after the Irishman.

" It looks as if he means to finish it this time. A right swing. Raftery caught it on his glove—and he's in again, a beautiful counter punch, Harneker swaying back, groggy for a second. Raftery's after him, pouncing on his chance like a leopard, a left to the head, sinking his right into Harneker's stomach, hooking viciously as Harneker hangs on the ropes. The crowd's crazy; left, right, left, right, piston-punching at Harneker's jaw, cracking him from side to side like a sawdust doll—*and Harneker's down*, just crumpling to the floor. The referee pulling Raftery away from him, game as a fighting cock.

" Oh, this is turning into a tremendous fight . . . seven . . . eight . . . Harneker resting on one knee, shaking his head—a badly astonished man I should think, and he must be feeling that age difference now. Ten years is a heavy handicap by the end of a fight. Up now, moving forward, looking more than a little worried, not too keen to go in and mix it. Raftery backpedalling, lancing out a retreating left. And he's on to Harneker again—changed feet, left, right . . . a beautiful short hook to the body, a right cross to the chin, *and Harneker's down!* He's really down this time. Listen to the crowd." And the crowd-roar swelling like a storm of thunder, a ground-beat rhythm in it, " *Red Mick, Red Mick . . .*"

I was afraid to look at Brid, afraid to think, only sit with my fists clenched and the sweat hot on my body, running like streams of oil down my tensed back.

" Harneker up again, but a dazed man, he doesn't seem able to

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see Raftery. The referee is turning him round, standing back—and Raftery is in for the kill! I've never seen him move like this . . . polished lightning . . . in, out—you can hear the punches, I should think—solid clouts into Harneker's body, all of Raftery's weight behind them. Harneker swaying on his feet with his arms hanging—and *he's down again* . . ."

The crowd screaming, drowning the whisper, the counting, everything in one huge frenzy of excitement, until the commentator came again, shouting to be heard: ". . . four . . . five . . . Raftery in his neutral corner, poised to go in again if Harneker gets up, but he's not moving . . . eight . . . nine . . . *and he's out!* Raftery has just won the lightweight championship of the world by a knockout in the tenth round." And a great surging roar from the stadium, roar on roar like a forest burning. "They're fighting to get into the ring, to chair the new champion—every Irishman in London seems to be trampling the ringside seats to matchwood—" and the chant beating like a pulse of blood, "*Red Mick, Red Mick, Red Mick.*"

Beside me Brid sank very quietly on to the worn red carpet, her lips ashen, her eyes wide and staring and unconscious. I carried her up the stairs with my heart stopped, and put her into her narrow bed, while Mary fetched hot jars and brandy. Her lips moved, and she moaned brokenly. "Got to fight—got to keep fighting. Oh God, it hurts so much." And her mother and I stared at each other, half afraid of the child we had.

It was nine o'clock the next morning when the telegram came. THOUGHT OF YOU ALL THROUGH THE FIGHT. COMING HOME TOMORROW. MIKE. Addressed to Brid. I went up with it and found her awake.

"Read it to me," she whispered with stiff lips and frightened eyes. And then, when I had read it to her, "Give it to me." She read it again for herself, and smiled, and put it against her heart. The heart that had reached out across three hundred miles and fought like a tigress for its mate.

You think I'm mad? Maybe. But Michael never fought again. And when they ask him why, he doesn't tell them the doctor's reason; about the bone in his left hand that must have been broken early on in that last fight, and that has never knit the way it should.

He just leans on the counter of the little shop—his shop and Brid's—and smiles. "I hadn't the right heart for it," he says. And if Brid is there she smiles too, because the man who was once champion of the world can afford to say that kind of thing.

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A GAME OF BRIDGE AT BLADES

James Bond fans the world over—and bridge-players everywhere—will be delighted to find their hero in this month's Argosy reprint solving with his (and Ian Fleming's) brilliant éclat and panache a desperately exciting problem taken from Moonraker.

by Ian Fleming

IT WAS eight o'clock as James Bond followed M. through the tall doors, across the well of the staircase from the card-room that opened into the beautiful white-and-gold Regency dining-room of Blades.

M. chose not to hear a call from Basildon who was presiding over the big centre table where there were still two places vacant. Instead, he walked firmly across the room to the end one of a row of six smaller tables, waved Bond into the comfortable armed chair that faced outwards into the room, and himself took the one on Bond's left so that his back was to the company.

The head steward was already behind Bond's chair. He placed a broad menu card beside his plate and handed another to M. *Blades* was written in fine gold script across the top. Below there was a forest of print.

"Don't bother to read through all that," said M., "unless you've got no ideas. One of the first rules of the club, and one of the best, was that any member may speak for any dish, cheap or dear, but he must pay for it. The same's true today, only the odds are one doesn't have to pay for it. Just order what you feel like." He looked up at the steward. "Any of that Beluga caviare left, Porterfield?"

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"Yes, sir. There was a new delivery last week."

"Well," said M. "Caviare for me. Devilled kidney and a slice of your excellent bacon. Peas and new potatoes. Strawberries in kirsch. What about you, James?"

"I've got a mania for really good smoked salmon," said Bond. Then he pointed down the menu, "Lamb cutlets. The same vegetables as you, as it's May. Asparagus with Béarnaise sauce sounds wonderful. And perhaps a slice of pineapple." He sat back and pushed the menu away.

"Thank heavens for a man who makes up his mind," said M. He looked up at the steward. "Have you got all that, Porterfield?"

"Yes, sir." The steward smiled. "You wouldn't care for a marrowbone after the strawberries, sir? We got half a dozen in today from the country, and I'd specially kept one in case you came in."

"Of course. You know I can't resist them. Bad for me but it can't be helped. God knows what I'm celebrating this evening. But it doesn't often happen. Ask Grimley to come over, would you."

"He's here now, sir," said the steward, making way for the wine-waiter.

"Ah, Grimley, some vodka please." He turned to Bond. "Not the stuff you had in your cocktail. This is real prewar Wolfschmidt from Riga. Like some with your smoked salmon?"

"Very much," said Bond.

"Then what?" asked M. "Champagne? Personally I'm going to have a half-bottle of claret. The Mouton-Rothschild '34, please, Grimley. But don't pay any attention to me, James. I'm an old man. Champagne's no good for me. We've got some good champagnes, haven't we, Grimley? None of that stuff you're always telling me about, I'm afraid, James. Don't often see it in England. Taittinger, wasn't it?"

Bond smiled at M.'s memory. "Yes," he said, "but it's only a fad of mine. As a matter of fact, for various reasons I believe I would like to drink champagne this evening. Perhaps I could leave it to Grimley."

The wine-waiter was pleased. "If I may suggest it, sir, the Dom Pérignon '46. I understand that France only sells it for dollars, sir, so you don't often see it in London. I believe it was a gift from the Regency Club in New York, sir.

"I have some on ice at the moment. It's the chairman's favourite and he'd told me to have it ready every evening in case he needs it."

Bond smiled his agreement.

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"So be it, Grimley," said M. "The Dom Pérignon. Bring it straight away, would you?"

A waitress appeared and put racks of fresh toast on the table and a silver dish of Jersey butter. As she bent over the table her black skirt brushed Bond's arm and he looked up into two pert, sparkling eyes under a soft fringe of hair. The eyes held his for a fraction of a second and then she whisked away.

Bond's eyes followed the white bow at her waist and the starched collar and cuffs of her uniform as she went down the long room. His eyes narrowed. He recalled a prewar establishment in Paris where the girls were dressed with the same exciting severity. Until they turned round and showed their backs.

He smiled to himself. The Marthe Richards law had changed all that.

M. turned from studying their neighbours behind him. "Why were you so cryptic about drinking champagne?"

"Well, if you don't mind, sir," Bond explained, "I've got to get a bit tight tonight. I'll have to seem very drunk when the time comes. It's not an easy thing to act unless you do it with a good deal of conviction. I hope you won't get worried if I seem to get frayed at the edges later on."

M. shrugged his shoulders. "You've got a head like a rock, James," he said. "Drink as much as you like if it's going to help. Ah, here's the vodka."

When M. poured him three fingers from the frosted carafe, Bond took a pinch of black pepper and dropped it on the surface of the vodka. The pepper slowly settled to the bottom of the glass leaving a few grains on the surface which Bond dabbed up with the tip of a finger. Then he tossed the cold liquor well to the back of his throat and put his glass, with the dregs of the pepper at the bottom, back on the table.

M. gave him a glance of rather ironical inquiry.

"It's a trick the Russians taught me that time you attached me to the Embassy in Moscow," apologised Bond. "There's often quite a lot of fusel oil on the surface of this stuff—at least there used to be when it was badly distilled. Poisonous. In Russia, where you get a lot of bath-tub liquor, it's an understood thing to sprinkle a little pepper in your glass. It takes the fusel oil to the bottom. I got to like the taste and now it's a habit. But I shouldn't have insulted the club Wolfschmidt," he added with a grin.

M. grunted. "So long as you don't put pepper in Basildon's favourite champagne," he said dryly.

A harsh bray of laughter came from a table at the far end of the room. M. looked over his shoulder and then turned back to his

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caviare. "What do you think of this man Drax?" he said through a mouthful of buttered toast.

Bond helped himself to another slice of smoked salmon from the silver dish beside him. It had the delicate glutinous texture only achieved by Highland curers—very different from the desiccated products of Scandinavia. He rolled a wafer-thin slice of brown bread-and-butter into a cylinder and contemplated it thoughtfully.

"One can't like his manner much. At first I was rather surprised that you tolerate him here." He glanced at M., who shrugged his shoulders. "But that's none of my business and anyway clubs would be very dull without a sprinkling of eccentrics. And in any case he's a national hero and a millionaire and obviously an adequate card-player. Even when he isn't helping himself to the odds," he added.

"But I can see he's the sort of man I always imagined. Full-blooded, ruthless, shrewd. Plenty of guts. I'm not surprised he's managed to get where he is. What I don't understand is why he should be quite happy to throw it all away. This cheating of his. It's really beyond belief. What's he trying to prove with it? That he can beat everyone at everything?

"He seems to put so much passion into his cards—as if it wasn't a game at all, but some sort of trial of strength. You've only got to look at his fingernails. Bitten to the quick. And he sweats too much. There's a lot of tension there somewhere. It comes out in those ghastly jokes of his. They're harsh. There's no light touch about them. He seemed to want to squash Basildon like a fly.

"Hope I shall be able to keep my temper. That manner of his is pretty riling. He even treats his partner as if he was muck. He hasn't quite got under my skin, but I shan't at all mind sticking a very sharp pin into him tonight." He smiled at M. "If it comes off, that is."

"I know what you mean," said M. "But you may be being a bit hard on the man. After all, it's a big step from the Liverpool docks, or wherever he came from, to where he is now. And he's one of those people who was born with naturally hairy heels. Nothing to do with snobbery. I expect his mates in Liverpool found him just as loud-mouthed as Blades does.

"As for his cheating, there's probably a crooked streak in him somewhere. I dare say he took plenty of short cuts on his way up. Somebody said that to become very rich you have to be helped by a combination of remarkable circumstances and an unbroken run of luck. It certainly isn't only the qualities of people that make them rich. At least that's my experience.

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"At the beginning, getting together the first ten thousand, or the first hundred thousand, things have got to go damn right. And in that commodity business after the war, with all the regulations and restrictions, I expect it was often a case of being able to drop a thousand pounds in the right pocket. Officials. The ones who understood nothing but addition, division—and silence. The useful ones."

M. paused while the next course came. With it arrived the champagne in a silver ice-bucket, and the small wicker basket containing M.'s half-bottle of claret.

The wine-steward waited until they had delivered a favourable judgment on the wines and then moved away. As he did so, a page came up to their table. "Commander Bond?" he asked.

Bond took the envelope that was handed to him and slit it open. He took out a thin paper packet and carefully opened it under the level of the table. It contained a white powder. He took a silver fruit knife off the table and dipped the tip of the blade into the packet so that about half its contents were transferred to the knife. He reached for his glass of champagne and tipped the powder into it.

"Now what?" said M. with a trace of impatience.

There was no hint of apology in Bond's face. It wasn't M. who was going to have to do the work that evening. Bond knew what he was doing. Whenever he had a job of work to do he would take infinite pains beforehand and leave as little as possible to chance. Then if something went wrong it was the unforeseeable. For that he accepted no responsibility.

"Benzedrine," he said. "I rang up my secretary before dinner and asked her to wangle some out of the surgery at Headquarters. It's what I shall need if I'm going to keep my wits about me tonight. It's apt to make one a bit over-confident, but that'll be a help too."

He stirred the champagne with a scrap of toast so that the white powder whirled among the bubbles. Then he drank the mixture down with one long swallow. "It doesn't taste," said Bond, "and the champagne is quite excellent."

M. smiled at him indulgently. "It's your funeral," he said. "Now we'd better get on with our dinner. How were the cutlets?"

"Superb," said Bond. "I could cut them with a fork. The best English cooking is the best in the world—particularly at this time of the year. By the way, what stakes will we be playing for this evening? I don't mind very much. We ought to end up the winners. But I'd like to know how much it will cost Drax."

"Drax likes to play for what he calls 'One and One,'" said

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M., helping himself from the strawberries that had just been put on the table. "Modest sounding stake, if you don't know what it stands for. In fact it's one tenner a hundred and one hundred pounds on the rubber."

"Oh," said Bond respectfully. "I see."

"But he's perfectly happy to play for Two and Two or even Three and Three. Mounts up at those figures. The average rubber of bridge at Blades is about ten points. That's £200 at One and One. And the bridge here makes for big rubbers. There are no conventions, so there's plenty of gambling and bluffing. Sometimes it's more like poker.

"They're a mixed lot of players. Some of them are the best in England, but others are terribly wild. Don't seem to mind how much they lose. General Bealey, just behind us—" M. made a gesture with his head—"doesn't know the reds from the blacks. Nearly always a few hundred down at the end of the week. Doesn't seem to care. Bad heart. No dependants. Stacks of money from jute.

"But Duff Sutherland, the scruffy-looking chap next to the chairman, is an absolute killer. Makes a regular ten thousand a year out of the club. Nice chap. Wonderful card manners. Used to play chess for England."

M. was interrupted by the arrival of his marrowbone. It was placed upright in a spotless lace napkin on the silver plate. An ornate silver marrow-scoop was laid beside it.

After the asparagus, Bond had little appetite for the thin slivers of pineapple. He tipped the last of the ice-cold champagne into his glass. He felt wonderful. The effects of the benzedrine and champagne had more than offset the splendour of the food. For the first time he took his mind away from the dinner and his conversation with M. and glanced round the room.

It was a sparkling scene. There were perhaps fifty men in the room, the majority in dinner-jackets, all at ease with themselves and their surroundings, all stimulated by the peerless food and drink, all animated by a common interest—the prospect of high gambling, the grand slam, the ace pot, the key-throw in a 64 game at backgammon. There might be cheats or possible cheats among them, men who beat their wives, men with perverse instincts, greedy men, cowardly men, lying men; but the elegance of the room invested each one with a kind of aristocracy.

At the far end, above the cold table laden with lobsters, pies, joints, and delicacies in aspic, Romney's unfinished full-length portrait of Mrs. Fitzherbert gazed provocatively across at Fragonard's *Jeu de Cartes*, the broad conversation piece which

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half-filled the opposite wall above the Adam fireplace. Along the lateral walls, in the centre of each gilt-edged panel, was one of the rare engravings of the Hell-Fire Club in which each figure is shown making a minute gesture of scatological or magical significance. Above, marrying the walls into the ceiling, ran a frieze in plaster relief of carved urns and swags interrupted at intervals by the capitals of the fluted pilasters which framed the windows and the tall double doors, the latter delicately carved with a design showing the Tudor Rose interwoven with a ribbon effect.

The central chandelier, a cascade of crystal ropes terminating in a broad basket of strung quartz, sparkled warmly above the white damask tablecloths and George IV silver. Below, in the centre of each table, branched candlesticks distributed the golden light of three candles, each surmounted by a red silk shade, so that the faces of the diners shone with a convivial warmth which glossed over the occasional chill of an eye or cruel twist of a mouth.

Even as Bond drank in the warm elegance of the scene, some of the groups began to break up. There was a drift towards the door accompanied by an exchange of challenges, side-bets, and exhortations to hurry up and get down to business. Sir Hugo Drax, his hairy red face shining with cheerful anticipation, came towards them with Meyer in his wake.

"Well, gentlemen," he said jovially as he reached their table. "Are the lambs ready for the slaughter and the geese for the plucking?"

He grinned and in wolfish pantomime drew a finger across his throat. "We'll go ahead and lay out the axe and the basket. Made your wills?"

"Be with you in a moment," said M. edgily. "You go along and stack the cards."

Drax laughed. "We shan't need any artificial aids," he said. "Don't be long." He turned and made for the door. Meyer enveloped them in an uncertain smile and followed him.

M. grunted. "We'll have coffee and brandy in the card-room," he said to Bond. "Can't smoke here. Now then. Any final plans?"

"I'll have to fatten him up for the kill, so please don't worry if I seem to be betting high," said Bond. "We'll just have to play our normal game till the time comes. When it's his deal, we'll have to be careful. Of course, he can't alter the cards and there's no reason why he shouldn't deal us good hands, but he's bound to bring off some pretty remarkable coups. Do you mind if I sit on his left?"

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"No," said M. "Anything else?"

Bond reflected for a moment. "Only one thing, sir," he said. "When the time comes, I shall take a white handkerchief out of my coat pocket. That will mean that you are about to be dealt a yarborough. Would you please leave the bidding of that hand to me?"

Drax and Meyer were waiting for them. They were leaning back in their chairs, smoking Cabinet Havanas.

On the small tables beside them there was coffee and large balloons of brandy. As M. and Bond came up, Drax was tearing the paper cover off a new pack of cards. The other pack was fanned out across the green baize in front of him.

"Ah, there you are," said Drax. He leaned forward and cut a card. They all followed suit. Drax won the cut and elected to stay where he was and take the red cards.

Bond sat down on Drax's left.

M. beckoned to a passing waiter. "Coffee and the club brandy," he said. He took out a thin black cheroot and offered one to Bond who accepted it. Then he picked up the red cards and started to shuffle them.

"Stakes?" asked Drax, looking at M. "One and One? Or more? I'll be glad to accommodate you up to Five and Five."

"One and One'll be enough for me," said M. "James?"

Drax cut in. "I suppose your guest knows what he's in for?" he asked sharply.

Bond answered for M. "Yes," he said briefly. He smiled at Drax. "And I feel rather generous tonight. What would you like to take off me?"

"Every penny you've got," said Drax cheerfully. "How much can you afford?"

"I'll tell you when there's none left," said Bond. He suddenly decided to be ruthless. "I'm told that Five and Five is your limit. Let's play for that."

Almost before the words were out of his mouth he regretted them. £50 a hundred! £500 side-bets! Four bad rubbers would be double his income for a year. If something went wrong he'd look pretty stupid. Have to borrow from M. And M. wasn't a particularly rich man.

Suddenly he saw that this ridiculous game might end in a very nasty mess. He felt the trickle of sweat on his forehead. That damned benzedrine. And for him of all people to allow himself to be needled by a blustering loud-mouthed bastard like Drax. And he wasn't even on a job.

The whole evening was a bit of social pantomime that meant

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less than nothing to him. Even M. had only been dragged into it by chance. And all of a sudden he'd let himself be swept up into a duel with this multi-millionaire, into a gamble for literally all Bond possessed, for the simple reason that the man had got filthy manners and he'd wanted to teach him a lesson. And supposing the lesson didn't come off? Bond cursed himself for an impulse that earlier in the day would have seemed unthinkable. Champagne and benzedrine! Never again.

Drax was looking at him in sarcastic disbelief. He turned to M. who was still unconcernedly shuffling the cards. "I suppose your guest is good for his commitments," he said. Unforgivably.

Bond saw the blood rush up M.'s neck and into his face. M. paused for an instant in his shuffling. When he continued, Bond noticed that his hands were quite calm. M. looked up and took the cheroot very deliberately out from between his teeth. His voice was perfectly controlled. "If you mean, am I good for my guest's commitments," he said coldly, "the answer is yes."

He cut the cards to Drax with his left hand, and with his right knocked the ash off his cheroot into the copper ashtray in the corner of the table. Bond heard the faint hiss as the burning ash hit the water.

Drax squinted sideways at M. He picked up the cards. "Of course, of course," he said hastily. "I didn't mean . . ." He left the sentence unfinished and turned to Bond.

"Right, then," he said, looking rather curiously at Bond. "Five and Five it is. Meyer," he turned to his partner, "how much would you like to take? There's Six and Six to cut up."

"One and One's enough for me, Hugger," said Meyer apologetically. "Unless you'd like me to take some more." He looked anxiously at his partner.

"Of course not," said Drax. "I like a high game. Never get enough on generally. Now then—" he started to deal—"off we go."

And suddenly Bond didn't care about the high stakes. Suddenly all he wanted to do was to give this hairy ape the lesson of his life, give him a shock which would make him remember this evening for ever, remember Bond, remember M., remember the last time he would cheat at Blades, remember the time of day, the weather outside, what he had for dinner.

As he watched the casual downward glance at the cigarette-case between the two hands and felt the cool memory ticking up the card values as they passed over its surface, Bond cleared his mind of all regrets, absolved himself of all blame for what was about to happen, and focused his attention on the game.

He settled himself more comfortably into his chair and rested

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his hands on the padded leather arms. Then he took the thin cheroot from between his teeth, laid it on the burnished copper surround of the ashtray beside him and reached for his coffee. It was very black and strong. He emptied the cup and picked up the balloon glass with its fat measure of pale brandy. As he sipped it and then drank again, more deeply, he looked over the rim at M. M. met his eye and smiled briefly.

"Hope you like it," he said. "Comes from one of the Rothschild estates at Cognac. About a hundred years ago one of the family bequeathed us a barrel of it every year in perpetuity. During the war they hid a barrel for us every year and then sent us over the whole lot in 1945. Ever since then we've been drinking doubles. And—" he gathered up his cards—"now we shall have to concentrate."

Bond picked up his hand. It was average. A bare two-and-a-half quick tricks, the suits evenly distributed. He reached for his cheroot and gave it a final draw, then killed it in the ashtray.

"Three clubs," said Drax.

No bid from Bond.

Four clubs from Meyer.

No bid from M.

Hm, thought Bond. He's not quite got the cards for a game call this time. Shut-out call—knows that his partner has got a bare raise. M. may have got a perfectly good bid. We may have all the hearts between us, for instance. But M. never gets a bid. Presumably they'll make four clubs.

They did, with the help of one finesse through Bond. M. turned out not to have had hearts, but a long string of diamonds, missing only the king, which was in Meyer's hand and would have been caught. Drax didn't have nearly enough length for a three call. Meyer had the rest of the clubs.

Anyway, thought Bond as he dealt the next hand, we were lucky to escape without a game call.

Their good luck continued. Bond opened a No Trump, was put up to three by M., and they made it with an over-trick. On Meyer's deal they went one down in five diamonds, but on the next hand M. opened four spades and Bond's three small trumps and an outside king, queen were all M. needed for the contract.

First rubber to M. and Bond. Drax looked annoyed. He had lost £900 on the rubber and the cards seemed to be running against them.

"Shall we go straight on?" he asked. "No point in cutting."

M. smiled across at Bond. The same thought was in both their minds. So Drax wanted to keep the deal. Bond shrugged his shoulders.

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"No objection," said M. "These seats seem to be doing their best for us."

"Up to now," said Drax, looking more cheerful.

And with reason. On the next hand he and Meyer bid and made a small slam in spades that required two hair-raising finesses, both of which Drax, after a good deal of pantomime and hemming and hawing, negotiated smoothly, each time commenting loudly on his good fortune.

"Hugger, you're wonderful," said Meyer fulsomely. "How the devil do you do it?"

Bond thought it time to sow a tiny seed. "Memory," he said.

Drax looked at him sharply. "What do you mean, memory?" he said. "What's that got to do with taking a finesse?"

"I was going to add 'and card sense,'" said Bond smoothly. "They're the two qualities that make great card-players."

"Oh," said Drax slowly. "Yes, I see." He cut the cards to Bond, and as Bond dealt he felt the other man's eyes examining him carefully.

The game proceeded at an even pace. The cards refused to get hot and no one seemed inclined to take chances. M. doubled Meyer in an incautious four-spade bid and got him two down vulnerable, but on the next hand Drax went out with a lay down three No Trumps. Bond's win on the first rubber was wiped out and a bit more besides.

"Anyone care for a drink?" asked M. as he cut the cards to Drax for the third rubber. "James, a little more champagne. The second bottle always tastes better."

"I'd like that very much," said Bond.

The waiter came. The others ordered whiskies and sodas.

Drax turned to Bond. "This game needs livening up," he said. "A hundred we win this hand." He had completed the deal and the cards lay in neat piles in the centre of the table.

Bond looked at him. The damaged eye glared at him redly. The other was cold and hard and scornful. There were beads of sweat on either side of the large beaky nose.

Bond wondered if he was having a fly thrown over him to see if he was suspicious of the deal. He decided to leave the man in doubt. It was a hundred down the drain, but it would give him an excuse for increasing the stakes later.

"On your deal?" he said with a smile. "Well—" he weighed imaginary chances—"yes. All right."

An idea seemed to come to him. "And the same on the next hand. If you like," he added.

"All right, all right," said Drax impatiently. "If you want to throw good money after bad."

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"You seem very certain about this hand," said Bond indifferently, picking up his cards. They were a poor lot and he had no answer to Drax's opening No Trump except to double it. The bluff had no effect on Drax's partner. Meyer said, "Two No Trumps," and Bond was relieved when M., with no long suit, said, "No bid." Drax left it in two No Trumps and made the contract.

"Thanks," he said with relish, and wrote carefully on his score. "Now let's see if you can get it back."

Much to his annoyance, Bond couldn't. The cards still ran for Meyer and Drax and they made three hearts and the game.

Drax was pleased with himself. He took a long swallow at his whisky and soda and wiped down his face with his bandanna handkerchief.

"God is with the big battalions," he said jovially. "Got to have the cards as well as play them. Coming back for more or had enough?"

Bond's champagne had come and was standing beside him in its silver bucket. There was a glass goblet three-quarters full beside it on the side table. Bond picked it up and drained it, as if to give himself Dutch courage. Then he filled it again.

"All right," he said thickly, "a hundred on the next two hands."

And promptly lost them both, and the rubber.

Bond suddenly realised that he was nearly £1,500 down. He drank another glass of champagne. "Save trouble if we just double the stakes on this rubber," he said rather wildly. "All right with you?"

Drax had dealt and was looking at his cards. His lips were wet with anticipation. He looked at Bond who seemed to be having difficulty lighting his cigarette. "Taken," he said quickly. "A hundred pounds a hundred and a thousand on the rubber." Then he felt he could risk a touch of sportsmanship. Bond could hardly cancel the bet now. "But I seem to have got some good tickets here," he added. "Are you still on?"

"Of course, of course," said Bond, clumsily picking up his hand. "I made the bet, didn't I?"

"All right then," said Drax with satisfaction. "Three No Trumps here." He made four.

Then, to Bond's relief, the cards turned. Bond bid and made a small slam in hearts and on the next hand M. ran out in three No Trumps.

Bond grinned cheerfully into the sweating face. Drax was picking angrily at his nails. "Big battalions," said Bond, rubbing it in.

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Drax growled something and busied himself with the score.

Bond looked across at M., who was putting a match, with evident satisfaction at the way the game had gone, to his second cheroot of the evening, an almost unheard-of indulgence.

"'Fraid this'll have to be my last rubber," said Bond. "Got to get up early. Hope you'll forgive me."

M. looked at his watch. "It's past midnight," he said. "What about you, Meyer?"

Meyer, who had been a silent passenger for most of the evening and who had the look of a man caught in a cage with a couple of tigers, seemed relieved at being offered a chance of making his escape. He leapt at the idea of getting back to his quiet flat in Albany and the soothing companionship of his collection of Battersea snuffboxes.

"Quite all right with me, Admiral," he said quickly. "What about you, Hugger? Nearly ready for bed?"

Drax ignored him. He looked up from his score-sheet at Bond. He noticed the signs of intoxication. The moist forehead, the black comma of hair that hung untidily over the right eyebrow, the sheen of alcohol in the grey-blue eyes.

"Pretty miserable balance so far," he said. "I make it you win a couple of hundred or so. Of course if you want to run out of the game you can. But how about some fireworks to finish up with? Treble the stakes on the last rubber? Fifteen and fifteen? Historic match. Am I on?"

Bond looked up at him. He paused before answering. He wanted Drax to remember every detail of this last rubber, every word that had been spoken, every gesture.

"Well," said Drax impatiently. "What about it?"

Bond looked into the cold left eye in the flushed face. He spoke to it alone.

"One hundred and fifty pounds a hundred, and £1,500 on the rubber," he said distinctly. "You're on."

There was a moment's silence at the table. It was broken by the agitated voice of Meyer.

"Here, I say," he said anxiously. "Don't include me in on this, Hugger." He knew it was a private bet with Bond, but he wanted to show Drax that he was thoroughly nervous about the whole affair. He saw himself making some ghastly mistake that would cost his partner a lot of money.

"Don't be ridiculous, Max," said Drax harshly. "You play your hand. This is nothing to do with you. Just an enjoyable little bet with our rash friend here. Come along, come along. My deal, Admiral."

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M. cut the cards and the game began.

Bond lit a cigarette with hands that had suddenly become quite steady. His mind was clear. He knew exactly what he had to do, and when, and he was glad that the moment of decision had come.

He sat back in his chair and for a moment he had the impression that there was a crowd behind him at each elbow, and that faces were peering over his shoulder, waiting to see his cards. He somehow felt that the ghosts were friendly, that they approved of the rough justice that was about to be done.

He smiled as he caught himself sending this company of dead gamblers a message, that they should see that all went well.

The background noise of the famous gaming-room broke in on his thoughts. He looked round. In the middle of the long room under the central chandelier, there were several onlookers round the poker game. "Raise you a hundred." "And a hundred." "And a hundred." "Damn you. I'll look," and a shout of triumph followed by a hubbub of comment. In the distance he could hear the rattle of a croupier's rake against the counters at the Chemmy game. Nearer at hand, at his end of the room, there were three other tables of bridge over which the smoke of cigars and cigarettes rose towards the barrelled ceiling.

Nearly every night for more than a hundred and fifty years there had been just such a scene, he reflected, in this famous room. The same cries of victory and defeat, the same dedicated faces, the same smell of tobacco and drama. For Bond, who loved gambling, it was the most exciting spectacle in the world. He gave it a last glance to fix it all in his mind and then he turned back to his table.

He picked up his cards and his eyes glittered. For once, on Drax's deal, he had a cast-iron game hand; seven spades with the four top honours, the ace of hearts, and the ace, king of diamonds. He looked at Drax. Had he and Meyer got the clubs? Even so Bond could overbid. Would Drax try and force him too high and risk a double? Bond waited.

"No bid," said Drax, unable to keep the bitterness of his private knowledge of Bond's hand out of his voice.

"Four spades," said Bond.

No bid from Meyer; and M.; reluctantly from Drax.

M. provided some help, and they made five.

One hundred and fifty points below the line. A hundred above for honours.

"Humph," said a voice at Bond's elbow. He looked up. It was Basildon. His game had finished and he had strolled over to see what was happening on this separate battlefield.

He picked up Bond's score-sheet and looked at it.

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"That was a bit of a beetle-crusher," he said cheerfully. "Seems you're holding the champions. What are the stakes?"

Bond left the answer to Drax. He was glad of the diversion. It could not have been better timed. Drax had cut the blue cards to him. He married the two halves and put the pack just in front of him, near the edge of the table.

"Fifteen and fifteen. On my left," said Drax.

Bond heard Basildon draw in his breath.

"Chap seemed to want to gamble, so I accommodated him. Now he goes and gets all the cards . . ."

Drax grumbled on.

Across the table, M. saw a white handkerchief materialise in Bond's right hand. M.'s eyes narrowed. Bond seemed to wipe his face with it. M. saw him glance sharply at Drax and Meyer, then the handkerchief was back in his pocket.

A blue pack was in Bond's hands and he had started to deal.

"That's the hell of a stake," said Basildon. "We once had a thousand-pound side-bet on a game of bridge. But that was in the rubber boom before the fourteen–eighteen war. Hope nobody's going to get hurt." He meant it. Very high stakes in a private game generally led to trouble. He walked round and stood between M. and Drax.

Bond completed the deal. With a touch of anxiety he picked up his cards.

He had nothing but five clubs to the ace, queen, ten, and eight small diamonds to the queen.

It was all right. The trap was set.

He almost felt Drax stiffen as the big man thumbed through his cards, and then, unbelieving, thumbed them through again. Bond knew that Drax had an incredibly good hand. Ten certain tricks, the ace, king of diamonds, the four top honours in spades, the four top honours in hearts, and the king, knave, nine of clubs.

Bond had dealt them to him—in the secretary's room before dinner.

Bond waited, wondering how Drax would react to the huge hand. He took an almost cruel interest in watching the greedy fish come to the lure.

Drax exceeded his expectations.

Casually he folded his hand and laid it on the table. Nonchalantly he took the flat carton out of his pocket, selected a cigarette, and lit it. He didn't look at Bond. He glanced up at Basildon.

"Yes," he said, continuing the conversation about their stakes. "It's a high game, but not the highest I've ever played. Once played for two thousand a rubber in Cairo. At the

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Mohammed Ali as a matter of fact. They've really got guts there. Often bet on every trick as well as on the game and rubber. Now—" he picked up his hand and looked slyly at Bond—" I've got some good tickets here. I'll admit it. But then you may have too, for all I know." (Unlikely, you old shark, thought Bond, with three of the ace-kings in your own hand.) " Care to have something extra just on this hand? "

Bond made a show of studying his cards with the minuteness of someone who is nearly very drunk. " I've got a promising lot too," he said thickly. " If my partner fits and the cards lie right I might make a lot of tricks myself. What are you suggesting? "

" Sounds as if we're pretty evenly matched," lied Drax. " What do you say to a hundred a trick on the side? From what you say, that shouldn't be too painful."

Bond looked thoughtful and rather fuddled. He took another careful look at his hand, running through the cards one by one. " All right," he said. " You're on. And frankly you've made me gamble. You've obviously got a big hand, so I must shut you out and chance it."

Bond looked blearily across at M. " Pay your losses on this one, partner," he said. " Here we go. Er—seven clubs."

In the dead silence that followed, Basildon, who had seen Drax's hand, was so startled that he dropped his whisky and soda on the floor. He looked dazedly down at the broken glass and let it lie.

Drax said, " What? " in a startled voice and hastily ran through his cards again for reassurance.

" Did you say grand slam in clubs? " he asked, looking curiously at his obviously drunken opponent. " Well, it's your funeral. What do you say, Max? "

" No bid," said Meyer, feeling in the air the electricity of just that crisis he had hoped to avoid. Why the hell hadn't he gone home before this last rubber? He groaned inwardly.

" No bid," said M., apparently unperturbed.

" Double."

The word came viciously out of Drax's mouth. He put down his hand and looked cruelly, scornfully at this tipsy oaf who had at last, inexplicably, fallen into his hands.

" That mean you double the side-bets too? " asked Bond.

" Yes," said Drax greedily. " Yes. That's what I meant."

" All right," said Bond. He paused. He looked at Drax and not at his hand. " Redouble. The contract and the side-bets. £400 a trick on the side."

It was at that moment that the first hint of a dreadful, incredible doubt entered Drax's mind. But again he looked at his hand, and

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again he was reassured. At the very worst he couldn't fail to make two tricks.

A muttered, "No bid," from Meyer.

A rather strangled, "No bid," from M.

An impatient shake of the head from Drax.

Basildon stood, his face very pale, looking intently across the table at Bond.

Then he walked slowly round the table, scrutinising all the hands. What he saw was this:

BOND

♦ Queen, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2
♣ Ace, queen, 10, 8, 4

DRAX

♠ Ace, king, queen, knave
♥ Ace, king, queen, knave
♦ Ace, king
♣ King, knave, 9

MEYER

♠ 6, 5, 4, 3, 2
♥ 10, 9, 8, 7, 2
♦ Knave, 10, 9

M.

♠ 10, 9, 8, 7
♥ 6, 5, 4, 3
♣ 7, 6, 5, 3, 2

And suddenly Basildon understood. It was a laydown Grand Slam for Bond against any defence. Whatever Meyer led, Bond must get in with a trump in his own hand or on the table. Then, in between clearing trumps, finessing of course against Drax, he would play two rounds of diamonds, trumping them in dummy and catching Drax's ace and king in the process. After five plays he would be left with the remaining trumps and six winning diamonds. Drax's aces and kings would be totally valueless.

It was sheer murder.

Basildon, almost in a trance, continued round the table and stood between M. and Meyer so that he could watch Drax's face, and Bond's. His own face was impassive, but his hands, which he had stuffed into his trouser pockets so that they would not betray him, were sweating. He waited, almost fearfully, for the terrible punishment that Drax was about to receive—thirteen separate lashes whose scars no card-player would ever lose.

"Come along, come along," said Drax impatiently. "Lead something, Max. Can't be here all night."

You poor fool, thought Basildon. In ten minutes you'll wish that Meyer had died in his chair before he could pull out that first card.

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In fact, Meyer looked as if at any moment he might have a stroke. He was deathly pale, and the perspiration was dropping off his chin on to his shirt front. For all he knew, his first card might be a disaster.

At last, reasoning that Bond might be void in his own long suits, spades and hearts, he led the knave of diamonds.

It made no difference what he led, but when M.'s hand went down showing chicane in diamonds, Drax snarled across at his partner, "Haven't you got anything else, you damn fool? Want to hand it to him on a plate? Whose side are you on, anyway?"

Meyer cringed into his clothes. "Best I could do, Hugger," he said miserably, wiping his face with his handkerchief.

But by this time Drax had got his own worries.

Bond trumped on the table, catching Drax's king of diamonds, and promptly led a club. Drax put up his nine. Bond took it with his ten and led a diamond, trumping it on the table. Drax's ace fell. Another club from the table, catching Drax's knave. Then the ace of clubs.

As Drax surrendered his king, for the first time he saw what might be happening. His eyes squinted anxiously at Bond, waiting fearfully for the next card. Had Bond got the diamonds? Hadn't Meyer got them guarded? After all, he had opened with them.

Drax waited, his cards slippery with sweat.

Morphy, the great chess-player, had a terrible habit. He would never raise his eyes from the game until he knew his opponent could not escape defeat. Then he would slowly lift his great head and gaze curiously at the man across the board. His opponent would feel the gaze and would slowly, humbly raise his eyes to meet Morphy's. At that moment he would know that it was no good continuing the game. The eyes of Morphy said so. There was nothing left but surrender.

Now, like Morphy, Bond lifted his head and looked straight into Drax's eyes. Then he slowly drew out the queen of diamonds and placed it on the table. Without waiting for Meyer to play he followed it, deliberately, with the 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, and the two winning clubs.

Then he spoke. "That's all, Drax," he said quietly, and sat slowly back in his chair.

Drax's first reaction was to lurch forward and tear Meyer's cards out of his hand. He faced them on the table, scrabbling feverishly among them for a possible winner.

Then he flung them back across the baize.

His face was dead white, but his eyes blazed redly at Bond. Suddenly he raised one clenched fist and crashed it on the table

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among the pile of impotent aces and kings and queens in front of him.

Very slowly, he spat the words at Bond. "You're a che—"

"That's enough, Drax." Basildon's voice came across the table like a whiplash. "None of that talk here. I've been watching the whole game. Settle up. If you've got any complaints, put them in writing to the committee."

Drax got slowly to his feet. He stood away from his chair and ran a hand through his wet red hair. The colour came slowly back into his face and with it an expression of cunning. He glanced down at Bond and there was in his good eye a contemptuous triumph which Bond found curiously disturbing.

He turned to the table. "Good night, gentlemen," he said, looking at each of them with the same oddly scornful expression. "I owe about £15,000. I will accept Meyer's addition."

He leaned forward and picked up his cigarette-case and lighter.

Then he looked again at Bond and spoke very quietly, the red moustache lifting slowly from the splayed upper teeth.

"I should spend the money quickly, Commander Bond," he said.

Then he turned away from the table and walked swiftly out of the room.

Ian Fleming protests when charged with snobbism over food. "You can't call a liking for smoked salmon and caviare snobbish—it's just damned good stuff!"

James Bond, special agent, undoubtedly agrees with his creator; though beyond certain shared sartorial interests, they have little else in common. So Fleming maintains. "I do rather envy him his blondes and his efficiency," he admitted, but I can't say I much like the chap."

What he does like, apart from low dives in Hamburg and long-haired pullovers, is to sail away to the blue Caribbean, to the house he designed himself in Jamaica. Sheltered by a coral reef, screened by giant palms, it is the birthplace of many of Bond's bizarre adventures. Why do men savour these with such appreciation? Because they express what every man hopes might happen and jolly well knows doesn't. So Fleming maintains.

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seascape

There are many advantages in sea-voyaging, but security is not one of them.

SADI

Little Harbours

So was all their coast, to
Whitby and beyond,
A land of little harbours,
little stilt-like houses
Standing in the tides;
Sometimes a doorway of the
jawbones of a whale,
A netted anchor, or the figure
from a ship,
Dredged from the seas, stood in
a white-washed yard
For spoil from the shoals, from
shimmer of the mackerel;
And the year went in wonders, the
great spring-tide
Ebbed with the moon, in an
electric morning
When air sparked and flashed,
when all the world was new;
That tide left the harbour dry; the keel-less ships
Leaned to one side, toppling on the
sand . . .

SACHEVERELL SITWELL, *Upon an Image from Dante*

Shining Flood

The water had been more phosphorescent than usual, so that every little fish left a track of light behind him, greatly disproportionate to his size. As the night wore on, the sea grew brighter and brighter, until by midnight we appeared to be sailing on an ocean of lambent flames. Every little wave that broke against the ship's side sent up a shower of diamond-like spray, wonderfully beautiful to see, while a passing school of porpoises

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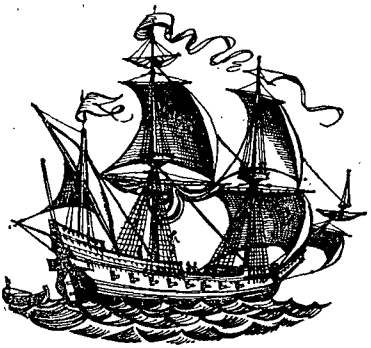

fairly set the sea blazing as they leapt and gambolled in its glowing waters. Looking up from sea to sky, the latter seemed quite black instead of blue, and the lustre of the stars diminished till they only looked like points of polished steel, having quite lost for a time their radiant sparkle. In the shining flood the blackness of the ship stood out in startling contrast, and when we looked over the side our faces were strangely lit up by the brilliant glow.

FRANK T. BULLEN, *The Cruise of the Cachalot*

Dolphin Delight

. . . Then did Ocean,
The great showman, out of the bountiful deep
Conjure all manner of strange creatures
To delight them: flying fish that shot through the air
Like quicksilver, smack against the sail,
Then dropped to deck into the breakfast saucepan
Waiting there; the prosperous tunny,
Fat as an alderman with rows of double chins;
The glorious dolphin, bluebottle-green
With glittering golden fins, greedy
For the succulent weed that trailed like garlands
From the steering oar.

IAN SERRAILLIER, *The Ballad of Kon-Tiki*

Sea Change

I once knew a writer who, after saying beautiful things about the sea, passed through a Pacific hurricane, and he became a changed man.

JOSHUA SLOCUM, *Sailing Alone Around the World*

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St. Alban's Race

Some years ago I was running down this coast with many companions—too many for so small a craft. All was with us: an excellent wind, bright sun, and a clear air. I warned my companions about this mischievous patch (which is also haunted), and I said we would go right outside and cheat it. So we put the bow a point or so off the course we were making, so as to get right out into the open and leave the exasperation by St. Alban inshore in the place to which his bad temper belongs. But not a bit of it. Even as we were looking landward, and laughing to see the tumble of water between us and the cliff, which tumble we thought thus to have escaped, even as we thought we had passed it, *the thing ran at us.*

It came on in a long line of white, just like a lot of dogs running up to play. It was abominably conscious and alive. It had said: "Here is a boat which thinks that, because it has gone outside, it can escape me," so it galloped up in a rush, and swarmed all around us, and we were in for an hour of it before we got to the regular water beyond.

HILAIRE BELLOC, *The Cruise of the Nona*

Sea-dog

The sea is a hungry dog,
Giant and grey.
He rolls on the beach all day.
With his clashing teeth and shaggy jaws
Hour upon hour he gnaws
The rumbling, tumbling stones,
And 'Bones, bones, bones, bones!'
The giant sea-dog moans,
Licking his greasy paws.

And when the night wind roars
And the moon rocks in the stormy cloud,
He bounds to his feet and snuffs and sniffs,
Shaking his wet sides over the cliffs,
And howls and hollos long and loud.

But on quiet days in May or June,
When even the grasses on the dune
Play no more their reedy tune,
With his head between his paws
He lies on the sandy shores,
So quiet, so quiet, he scarcely snores.

JAMES REEVES, *The Sea*

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SCARECROW

The woman flared,
"We've had big bright moons every single night."

BY DAVID ALEXANDER

ANDY TEVIS, the mail carrier, pulled up at an angle to the kerb directly in front of a NO PARKING sign outside the county courthouse in Clayville. He was a small, ageing man, but he seemed made of taut wire and saddle-leather as he leapt from the ancient vehicle with the agility of a self-important squirrel. It was the first Saturday of the month, court day, and there was a big crowd in town from the nearby farming areas. The loafers in front of the courthouse regarded Andy curiously as he pushed his way through, and a few called after him, "Hey, Andy! What's the matter? You got a letter from the President?"

Tevis did not bother to answer them. He hurried to a basement entrance of the courthouse with the urgent concentration that always marks the bearer of disastrous tidings. He entered the mildewed, neo-classic building that dated to pre-Civil War days and made his way down a narrow basement corridor that was dimly lighted by fly-specked, low-watt bulbs. He found a heavy door with the legend SHERIFF'S OFFICE inscribed on it and pushed it open.

Inside, Sheriff Charley Estes and his deputy, Coates Williams, were bent over cards and pegboards playing cribbage. Andy called out loudly, "Charley, old Jeff Purdy's dead!"

Estes, a lean, withered man, totted up his score carefully before he spoke. Then he said, "You mean Martha finally killed the ornery old boy, Andy?"

"I didn't say that," Andy answered. "All I said was he's dead. Been dead five or six days, maybe a week now. The Scarecrow don't keep much track of time, I guess."

"He must be plumb ripe by now," Coates Williams commented. "There ain't no embalmers out near Rocky Farm that I've heard of."

"The Scarecrow says he got drunk and fell off the big cliff into Winding River," Andy said. "He must've floated all the way to the Mississippi by now, I guess, the way that river runs when the spring thaws come."

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" Don't call Martha ' Scarecrow,' " the sheriff said to Tevis.

" That's what her own husband called her! " the little man flared. " And she looks like a raggedy scarecrow, if you want to know it. Something on a broomstick, that's what she is. I guess you ain't seen her in recent times. I have."

" I knew her all right when she was young," the sheriff replied. " She was Martha Parsons then and there wasn't a prettier girl in Jarrod County. I walked out with her myself when I was a young buck. She's not more than forty-five right now, today. Old Jeff must've been pushing sixty-five, at least. It was a plain cruel shame the way her old man married her off to that drunk; twenty-five years ago, at least, it was. She's been out there on that godforsaken farm ever since, never seeing anybody and never coming into town. If she's a scarecrow now, Jeff Purdy made her one."

Andy Tevis said, " I guess we never would have known old Jeff was dead, even, if the Scarecrow—Martha, I mean—didn't order one of them Burpee flower seed catalogues every living year. It was the only mail they ever got out there. I guess even the government didn't know they was alive because they never even got no income tax forms. I don't know what the hell she wanted with them catalogues. You couldn't grow flowers on that rocky land. You couldn't grow nothing but weeds and pigs and rough salad."

" How'd you find out? " Coates asked.

" Because the catalogue come and I had to drive up that old road to Rocky Farm that nobody's used since Dan'l Boone shot the bear. Damn near broke my axle. When I got there I just reached out and stuck the catalogue in the letterbox. Damn place gives me the creeps. No smoke from the chimney. No light in the window. House ain't had a coat of paint or even whitewash since Sherman come a-burning through these parts. Damn place leans in the wind like the town drunk on Saturday nights. Dismal, that's what it is."

Andy Tevis bit off a chew of tobacco, softened it in his mouth and chewed on it. He said, " I was starting up to turn around back to Route 16 when I heard this screeching that would curdle up your marrow. It was the Scarecrow calling to me. She was standing back there in the doorway and waving her skinny arms at me to come in. Well, I didn't want to, but I went."

Andy shook his head. " First time I was ever inside. Never saw nothing in all my life to equal it. Broken-down furniture and dust thick on everything and empty corn-squeezings jugs all over the place and a stink to make you wish your head was stuffed. I tell you that woman's plumb crazy daft.

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"She made me come inside and set down and didn't say nothing about her old man being deader'n a doornail all the time. She said I had to have a cup of tea with her, and nothing I could tell her would stop her from brewing me one. Honest to God, I got right sick, just looking at her. Part of the rags she was covered with was plain old burlap bags, I swear it. And it's a living cinch she hadn't washed herself all over in a year, but there she was brewing me a cup of tea, like she was some fine lady in a big white house.

"She got some cups out of an old trunk and told me they were the fine china she'd got for a wedding present. At least she washed them and they wasn't broken up like everything else in the place. Then she give me this cup of tea and said maybe I'd like some brandy in it! Brandy! She said it was from her father's cellars. Hell, old man Parsons didn't have nothing but the chamber pot beneath his bed when he passed away."

Andy spat and nodded with satisfaction when the spittoon rang. "The brandy she gave me was the corn-squeezings old Jeff made in his still. Then she told me. She said she was planning to do a lot of entertaining now that her husband was dead. She wanted me to invite all her friends from town out to see her. She mentioned you especially, Sheriff, by the way.

"Then she told me her husband had got drunk and beat her up and then stumbled up to the cliff and fallen off into Winding River some five-six-seven days ago, she wasn't quite sure when. I asked her why she hadn't reported it to the authorities, and she said she couldn't walk fourteen miles to town and that the old Ford that's rusting on the place didn't run no more and she didn't know how to drive it if it did. So I gulped down the tea and corn-squeezings and finished my round and come in to tell you to get up there."

Charley Estes said, "Poor Martha. I was right sweet on her when I was young but I couldn't marry her because I was working in the livery stable and studying correspondence courses and didn't have an extra pair of breeches to my name. Jeff Purdy had just been left a little money and old man Parsons married Martha off to him. She was pushing twenty maybe, and Jeff was forty odd. They had a good farm for a while in east Jarrod County, but Jeff drunk that and all the money up and moved out to that Rocky Farm on the river that no one's ever scrubbed a living out of in fifty years. They've been there ever since. You reckon the poor woman's had anything to eat, even, since the old bastard died?"

Andy Tevis said, "She said there was a side of bacon in the smoke house. She's been eating off of that and turnip greens."

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" Poor Martha," Charley Estes said, picking up his cards and scrutinising them.

" Ain't you even going out there? " Andy Tevis asked.

" Sure," said the sheriff. " I'll have to get Martha and bring her back here and find some place we can keep her. She can't live out there all alone if she's as bad off as you say. But there ain't no hurry. He's been dead a week, he'll stay dead till we finish this game. Coates is six cents up on me."

Coates picked up his cards and they resumed their game of cribbage. The taut little mail carrier stood by, fidgeting. Finally he said, " Charley, you think she killed her old man? "

Charley Estes played a card and grinned. He said, " How do you like that, Coates? " He turned to Andy Tevis, said, " I guess maybe I'll have to ask her while I'm up there."

Tevis spat, turned his back on the card players and left the office in disgust. He was glad it was court day. There would be plenty at Dan Squires' saloon who would listen to his story.

The sheriff and his deputy finished their game unhurriedly, and in the end Charley Estes regained his losses and won a dollar-ten. They put on macks because it was early spring and there was still a chill in the air and it was getting on towards late afternoon now. They left the office and piled into a 1952 Buick outside the building.

Coates said, " Think we ought to pick up the coroner? "

Charley Estes shook his head. " If he's in the river, there ain't no body, and if there ain't no body we don't need a coroner," he answered.

They drove to the east end of the town and the plankings of the old covered bridge over Clear Creek set up a thunderous rattling as they crossed it to reach the high-crowned road called Route 16. They drove in silence for a while, both seeming at peace with the red-gashed southern clay that formed the country landscape. At length Coates Williams spoke.

" Charley, you think this could really be a murder? "

Estes shrugged. " I wouldn't know," he said. " God knows, she had reason enough to kill him. It was a scandal the way he used her all their married life. Just after they moved to Rocky Farm she was going to have a child, but he wouldn't call a doctor in. Delivered the baby himself, I heard, and it was stillborn. Martha almost died, too. She had black eyes and broken arms from his beatings half the time.

" Once a fellow who'd been fishing in Winding River drove by there and he swore he heard screaming and saw Martha tied up to a post like an animal and old Purdy was blazing drunk

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and stripping the clothes right off her with a blacksnake whip.

"Then he got himself a hired girl from the county orphanage a long time ago. No more than fifteen, she was. He used to come into Squires' saloon on Saturdays in those days and he'd brag how he'd kicked Martha—the Scarecrow he called her, by then—out of his bed and taken the hired girl in to keep him warm. I flattened him with my fist once for calling her the Scarecrow. He starved her. It's no wonder she got skinny and lost her looks."

"I can't remember ever seeing him, even," Coates said.

"You're young," Charley replied. "He couldn't get more credit and he quit coming to town. He didn't do nothing much but make moonshine in that still of his. Sold some, but drunk most. He had some pigs for meat and turnips and weeds for rough salad and he got his kicks, after the hired girl run away, just torturing poor Martha. He was the meanest man who ever lived."

"It sounds like murder, all right," Coates declared.

"Maybe," said Charley, his face tight. "But it might be kind of hard to prove."

They drove for ten miles on the highway. Finally they came to a rutted, red-clay road that was littered with boulders as large as a man's head. Charley turned the car north on to it.

The car jarred and jolted and careered over the unmade road. Once they hit a boulder and had to pull right up after they almost skidded into the ditch. There was no sign of life except for a red fox that scurried across the road in front of them. It took them longer to cover the four miles than it had taken for ten on the highway. It was twilight when Rocky Farm came into view.

When Coates Williams saw the dilapidated wooden house he exclaimed, "What the hell's holding it up?"

Rocky Farm was covered with scrub and tangled weeds and boulders. It sat at the bottom of a high cliff that rose precipitously to frown down upon the rapid-running Winding River, a stream coloured by the red clay of the southern land that seemed blood-red in the sunset.

There was a tiny curl of smoke from the broken chimney now and the feeble glow of a lamp through one of the windows. Charley Estes parked the car outside the rusting, broken barbed-wire fence and he and his deputy walked up the weed-grown path to the crumbling house.

Charley had prepared himself for it, but when he saw the woman in the shadowy doorway, his stomach went sick. Unclean, mottled flesh that sagged in flaccid sacs on her bones showed through the many rents in her rags. Her greying hair

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was wildly matted and her mouth was almost toothless. He knocked her teeth out, Charley thought. To make the horror worse, the ragged woman's misshapen mouth was smiling at Charley expectantly.

Charley cleared his throat. He said, "Martha? I'm Charley Estes. You remember me?"

Her voice was cracked, like a voice that has not been used too often. She said, "Why, of course! You took me to the barn dance that the Knights of Pythias gave! And we had strawberry ice-cream at the church social and I spilt some on my nice yellow dress. I've been expecting you. I told the man who brings my flowers to invite you out for tea. Come right in and bring your friend. I'll put the kettle on and show you my flowers and we'll have a pleasant time. I just love entertaining."

They entered the littered, unswept room with the broken furniture. It seemed to be a combination kitchen and living-room. She motioned them towards rickety chairs, busied herself filling a kettle from a handpump. She put the kettle on the stove in which a fire was burning. She said, "The tea may be a little dry, I've saved it so long, but it's been in a metal can, tight sealed. It's fine tea, the kind we served in my father's house."

Once she had the tea kettle going, she went to the table. It was spread with clippings from the seed catalogue. She had cut out the pictures of roses and African violets and dahlias and had apparently been busy tacking them to the bare walls when her visitors arrived.

She said, "I've always loved flowers. They're sent to me every year, you see, by an admirer. Such lovely flowers. Very rare, some of them, too. But my husband, Mr. Purdy, did not fancy flowers. He's dead now, you know, so I can have all the flowers I want and lots of parties with tea and brandy. Only there's no cake today, I'm afraid."

"When did Purdy die?" the sheriff asked.

"Oh," the woman answered airily, as if it were of no consequence at all, "I think it was a week or so ago. I'm really not quite sure. I've been so busy with my flowers and entertaining. Why, you're the second visitors I've had this very afternoon!"

Estes said, "Tell me how he died, Martha."

She turned her thin back on him and went to the stove. She said, "The water's boiling. I'll give you your tea."

She shook tea-leaves that seemed to have crumbled to dust out of a canister into an old flowered teapot. While they were brewing, she said, "It was an accident."

"Tell me about it, Martha," urged Estes, his voice patient and kind.

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" We mustn't let the tea spoil," she said. She put cups in front of them. They were good china, with flowers painted on them, Charley noted. They had been scrubbed to gleaming brightness that contrasted with the squalor of the room. She said, " This is my best china. A wedding present. I've hardly used them. Mr. Purdy did not enjoy tea parties."

The hands that held the delicate teacups were sandpapery rough and big-knuckled and engrained with black dirt and the filth-caked nails were crinkled as tiny clamshells. Estes thought of times, long ago, he had held Martha Parsons' hands when they were courting and going to socials and barn dances. They had been tiny then and very white and soft as the petals of a garden flower.

Estes said, " I've got to tell you this, Martha. I'm the sheriff now. This here young fellow is named Coates Williams. He's my deputy. You know what that means, Martha? "

The Scarecrow who was pouring his tea said, " Why of course I do, Charley! It means you're a big success in life, just like I always knew you would be, working and studying so hard. Do you wish a little of my father's fine brandy in your tea, gentlemen? We'll drink to your success, Charley."

The sheriff looked dubiously at the cloudy corn whisky in the half-gallon jug and shook his head. He said, " Coates and I are temperate men, Martha, and we're on duty. We'll just have the tea. Now, Martha, when a man dies in what you call suspicious circumstances, like Jeff Purdy did, it's the duty of the sheriff and his deputy to investigate and to ask some questions, you understand? "

Martha's swimming eyes regarded Estes for a moment and there was a puzzled look in them. She said, " Well then, ask all the questions you want, Charley, but it will kind of spoil our nice tea party. There was nothing suspicious about Mr. Purdy's death, though. He just walked up that path to the cliff when he'd been drinking and fell off into Winding River and got carried downstream."

" Did you see him fall off, ma'am? " Coates Williams asked.

The woman said, " Why, I suppose so. Why yes, of course I did. I mean he was drinking a lot and I sort of missed him and I went looking for him and I saw him standing up there on the top of the cliff and then he staggered and tumbled off into Winding River. That's all there was to it."

Coates looked at Estes as if expecting him to continue the interrogation. The sheriff tried to gulp down the bitter tea. He said nothing.

" What time of day was this, ma'am? " Coates asked.

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"Oh, late. I mean it was evening-wards, about dark."

"It was dark?"

The woman nodded.

"But you said you *saw* him fall. How could you see him if it was dark? It's quite a way from the house to the cliff. A hundred yards, at least, I'd say."

The woman looked appealingly at Charley Estes. The sheriff did not meet her gaze. He sipped his tea noisily.

Finally Martha Purdy said, "Why, now I remember! There was a big bright moon!"

Coates Williams rose from his chair. He crossed to a corner where an old shotgun was standing against the wall. It was a dusty corner but the gun was not dusty. As he crossed the room, Williams said, "You say he died about a week ago. There's been rain and clouds over the moon for at least a week in these parts."

"Not out here!" the woman flared. "We've had big, bright moons every single night. They shine right through the window into my eyes and keep me wakeful."

Coates picked up the gun, smelled the barrel, broke it, examined the chambers. He said to Estes, "One barrel's been fired—not so long ago, either, I'd guess. There's a shell in the other one and the safety-catch was left off."

"That's right dangerous," the sheriff commented. "You better click that safety-catch on, Coates. A jolt could fire it and hurt somebody."

The woman licked her dry, cracked lips and once more she looked appealingly at Estes. This time he met her eyes briefly, then he gulped the remainder of the tea in his cup and said, "Martha, that's right fine tea. How about another cup?"

"Why, *certainly!*" the woman exclaimed, seeming delighted. "It's imported tea; very costly, you know. I'm sorry there's no more cake, but I've had so many guests it's all gone. I must remember to bake another tomorrow. I use an old family recipe. You remember when my mother's cake won the blue ribbon at the county fair, Charley?"

Charley nodded dumbly as she poured more of the dark, vile brew into his cup.

Coates said, "Ma'am, tell us what happened just before your husband fell off the cliff into the river."

The woman said, "I don't wish to speak evil of the dead, young man. But Mr. Purdy was a violent man when he was drinking and he hit me and knocked me down on the floor unconscious, so I don't know too much about what *did* happen, to tell the honest truth."

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Coates' eyes narrowed. "You say you were unconscious?"

"That's right. He blacked my eye and I hit my head when I fell down."

"But you said you *saw* him fall. How'd you see him fall if you were unconscious?"

Martha Purdy inhaled audibly and clamped her hand to her mouth. Finally she stammered, "Well, I mean I was unconscious there on the floor for a minute and then I sort of woke up and I missed Mr. Purdy and I went out to look for him and I saw him fall off the cliff into the Winding River."

"He was drunk and violent and he knocked you down but you went looking for him," said Coates doubtfully. "Tell me, when was the last time that old shotgun was fired?"

Martha said, "Is your tea all right, Charley? Can't I give you a little to warm yours up, young man? You've hardly touched your cup."

Coates shook his head and waited. Charley Estes swallowed tea.

The woman said, "Mr. Purdy was quite a good shot. He—he liked to kill things. Little animals, like rabbits and squirrels, although he never even skinned them. He went shooting in the woods the very day he died. That's when the gun was fired last."

Coates said, "Let's step outside the house a minute, so you can show us just where you were standing when you saw your husband fall."

"No hurry," Charley Estes protested. "We haven't finished our tea yet."

"No use waiting till it's dark," Coates persisted. "It's almost dark already."

They went outside the rickety house. The woman was standing on the doorstep. An old tree cut off her view of the towering cliff, but she said, "I was standing here. Just inside the door."

Coates said, "But you can't even see the cliff from here, ma'am."

She said, "Well, I was a little farther out, I guess. I was kind of dazed from being unconscious on the floor. I don't just remember."

They moved out farther into the weed-tangled yard. The evening was falling fast now and in the gathering dusk the cliff above the river reared like some misshapen monolith. Coates stiffened, and exclaimed, "What the holy hell is *that*?"

There was a rock-strewn area at the base of the cliff. In the centre of it stood something that resembled a human figure with outstretched arms.

Charley Estes said, "It's nothing, Coates. It's an old tree

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got hit by lightning years ago. The branches stick out like arms, the two lower ones that were left."

The old woman spoke hurriedly. She said, "It's a scarecrow. Mr. Purdy hung a scarecrow up on the tree. He didn't fancy birds. I liked to see them fly and hear them sing, but Mr. Purdy said birds were pesky things and he shot at them and built a scarecrow to frighten them away."

She turned to Estes. "Mr. Purdy called me 'Scarecrow' sometimes when he was drinking. He called me that because I'm not pretty like I used to be, I guess."

Coates was walking towards the rock patch and the stunted tree. Charley Estes called, "Wait a minute. Where're you going?"

Coates said, "I want a look at this scarecrow."

"Come back here!" Charley Estes snapped. "It's dark and that's a rough path. No use wasting time with scarecrows. You going crazy?"

Coates said, "I think we ought to look at it."

Estes shook his head. "I said come back, and I'm the sheriff. That's an order, Coates."

Coates returned reluctantly and they went back into the house.

"I don't see any reason we shouldn't take a look, at least," Coates Williams grumbled.

"It's getting dark," said the sheriff. "I don't want you stumbling into the river, too."

The woman was lighting another oil lamp. She said, "You two gentlemen must stay and have dinner with me. I just love having visitors. Mr. Purdy never liked social life, but I'm going to have lots of parties now, with all the fine china I got for my wedding present and never used. I'll go to the smoke house and get some meat and . . ."

Charley said, "No, Martha. Not tonight. Coates and I are married men and our little women are expecting us for supper. But we can't leave you out here alone. You need to rest a while in a hospital and have the doctors look you over and to get well fed so there's some meat on those bones. After that, I'm going to see if I can't get you a job of some sort or other round the courthouse or cleaning for some nice folks in town. You pick up whatever you need and put a wrap on and come with us."

"But I can't!" the woman cried, cowering away from him. "I can't go with you now!"

"Why?" asked Coates Williams. "Why can't you?"

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"Because there's things to do before I leave, that's why."

"What things?" Coates asked.

"Why, I've got to pack up all my wedding china and the trousseau clothes I never wore, and—and lots of things," the woman said.

"All right, Martha," Charley Estes said gently. "You do your packing and whatever else you've got to do. Coates and I are going in to eat our supper. I'll drive back here in a couple of hours or so for you. You be ready."

He shoved Coates towards the door. Coates said, "Why don't we wait for her? There's no point in coming all the way back here tonight, Charley. Those last four miles are rough."

Charley Estes said, "I won't need you . . . I'll come back by myself."

They got into the car. They were both silent as they drove over the boulder-strewn clay road.

When they reached Route 16 at last, Coates said, "Charley, old Purdy was a good shot. Had been all his life, I hear. A man like that doesn't leave the safety-catch off when he sets down a loaded shotgun in a corner."

Estes said, "Purdy was a drunk. You can't calculate the things a drunk might do."

The car sped over the high-crowned road and the night fluttered like dark mourning streamers.

Coates said, "That's a funny place to put a scarecrow, in that rocky patch there at the foot of the cliff, beside the river. There's not even any ragweed for birds to pick at."

Charley Estes did not answer.

Coates said, "He called her 'Scarecrow,' Charley. She must have hated him for that. Now just suppose—just suppose, I say—that she shot him there beside that stunted tree the lightning hit. The tree that's got two arms reaching out like a man. Just suppose she pulled him up and hitched his body to the tree, like a scarecrow. You couldn't see it from the road. She would be the only one could see it—from the house. Did you notice the smell when that wind came up from the river, Charley?"

"Can't say I did," Estes answered. "Dead fish wash up when the river's running, anyway. And there's lots of skunks in this country, Coates."

Coates grunted doubtfully. "Just suppose she did what I said, though. Can you imagine what it was like the past week or so out there? The thing hanging to the tree and the old woman remembering all his drunken meanness while she stood there outside the doorway, screeching.

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"I can almost hear her yelling at the thing—'Scarecrow! Scarecrow! Scarecrow!'"

"You've got quite an imagination, Coates," said Charley Estes. "Maybe you shouldn't be my deputy. Maybe you should be writing storybooks."

They were silent until the twinkling lights of Clayville and the hulk of the old covered bridge came into view.

Then Coates said, "Tell me the truth, Charley. Do you really think old Jeff Purdy's in the river?"

Charley Estes didn't seem to hear the question. He said, "You know, it was downright pitiful poor Martha wanting to stay on a while to pack up things she never used."

"Yeah," said Coates. "Yeah, I forgot. She said that she had things to do. I guess the scarecrow won't be there tomorrow."

HERE'S HOW

Or, as the Indians say when inaugurating a pow-wow, how now, paleface cow? Not, we hasten to add, that we would address Argosy readers in such terms. Solutions to our how-about-it quiz, for the less erudite of these, are on page 135

1. *What is:* *i.* *a howler*
   ii. *a howlet*
   iii. *a howdar*
   iv. *a howitzer*

2. "*Here's a how-de-doo!*"—*in which opera?*

3. *Who wrote:* *i.* *How to Be an Alien*
   ii. *How Green Was My Valley*
   iii. *Madam How and Lady Why*
   iv. *Howards End*

4. *How many:* *i.* *quarts in a magnum of champagne*
   ii. *animals are admitted to the Moslem's paradise*
   iii. *miles to Babylon*

5. *How much do you suppose an African elephant weighs?*

6. "*I keep six honest serving-men*
   (They taught me all I knew);
   Their names are What and Why and When
   And How and Where and Who."
   Author?

7. *How's that? In what sport is this phrase commonly used?*

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SILVER DHARLIN'

A right tease she was—
with a wriggle an' a flip she was away

BY IRMA WOOD

THE storm that blew up Corryvarrich Loch from across the Irish Sea an' lifted Patrick O'Halloran's fishin'-boat right over Maggie Macpherson's garden wall an' set it down in her cabbage patch was the start of it. Patrick's black curls that set your fingers itchin' an' his sonsie beard that grew as God intended, an' the look in his eye that made Maggie drop four stitches of her knittin', was the middle of it. An' a weddin' dress with a sprig o' heather an' a spray o' shamrock, an' the pipes an' the fiddles playin' *The Cooper o' Fife* an' *Phil the Fluter's Ball*, was the end of it. Leastways, until their son Fergus came all the way back from Ireland to Corryvarrich to see his Anty Jean—and, as she kenned fine—to find himself a wife.

'Twas his father's looks he had an' his mither's ways, an' bedivilled he was between the two of 'em bedad, for the Irish in him was for iver argifyin' wi' the Scotch so that the poor spalpeen could niver make up his mind at all at all.

For three Saturdays he danced at the ceilidh in his tight black shoes wi' Jeannie McTavish. A rare sparkle she had forbye an' her bonny brown eyes an' rosy cheeks plagued him till he didna ken whether 'twas jig or reel he was dancin'.

But on the fourth Saturday bedad, she tossed her head an' snapped her brown eyes. "If ye cannae stop yer haverin' aboot yon Irish hussies, Fergus O'Halloran, ye'd best get back to yon heathen country an' marry yin." An' she upped an' danced the rest o' the evenin' wi' Jock Mactaggert an' divil another glance did she give poor Fergus.

'Twas the unhappy man he was when he went out in the dark an' sat himself down on the jetty. For comfort he took off his tight black shoes an' dangled his feet in the water, an' for consolation he drew from his pocket his wee bottle, an' he thought of Jeannie McTavish an' he thought of Kathleen O'Shaughnessy, an' the longer he sat the more he thought, an' the more he thought the greater his confusion grew.

He was liftin' his wee bottle for the sixth time when he heard

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a gurgle an' a splash a few yards to his left, an' to his astonishment beheld Jeannie McTavish standin' waist deep in the moonlit water o' the loch an' shakin' a cascade o' droplets from her streamin' hair. He shut his eyes tight an' counted from one to ten in the Gaelic an' when he opened them she'd gone she had.

" Egorra," said Fergus, an' drained the last drop from his wee bottle. 'Twas into the loch he was about to throw it when his toes were grippit an' he was jerked into the water. Just a glimpse he had of a laughin' face an' long streamin' hair an' then Jeannie's hand slipped in his an' they went swimmin' into the moonlight.

Deep into the water she took him an' him grippin' tight to her wee hand. Her hair streamed out behind an' for sure 'twas the longest hair he'd ever seen. 'Twas the fine swimmer she was forbye, assisted no doubt by the flipper attached to the end of her fancy pants, an' in no time at all at all they were at the bottom o' the sea where he lay on a fine bed o' kelp an' watched her as she sat on a rock an' combed her hair. She peeped at him from atween the strands an' when she laughed a stream o' bubbles floated across an' caught in his sonsie beard.

" Jeannie," he said—to the great surprise of a passing roach—but he got no further, for Jeannie's eyes were the gold of a bumble-bee, surely, not the green o' the sea. An' Jeannie's skin was pink an' white with niver a silvery sheen. An' niver, niver, in a thousand years would Jeannie McTavish go a-swimmin' in the loch without a bra at all at all.

She flicked her flipper an' floated across to nestle beside him, bringin' with her a fine aroma o' fresh young shrimps—to which, incidentally, Fergus was extremely partial. She blew a bubble into his right ear, an' the heart of him turned tapsalteerie. No longer did he think of Jeannie McTavish, nor of Kathleen O'Shaughnessy, an' when she plucked a handful o' wee silver fish from a passin' shoal, he opened his mouth an' swallowed 'em wi' divil a thought.

He ran his fingers through her hair an' startled three baby crabs. He played with the pearls an' the twin bits o' coral that lay on her bosom an' when he stroked her silvery flank, her tail quivered an' beat a delicate tattoo on the sand.

She nestled close an' stroked the sole of his foot wi' the tip of her flipper, gently dislodging a periwinkle from between his toes, an' when she sang a wee song in his ear he kenned fine what 'twas all about, though 'twas neither in the Irish nor the Scotch.

'Twas the eager boy was Fergus bedad, an' for a person of indecisive mind he showed a fine singleness o' purpose. The

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blood in his veins began to race, both his mither's an' his dad's, though niver a moment's indecision did he feel at all at all. But a right tease she was, an' with a wriggle an' a flip she was away through the wavin' weed, blowin' a bugle-call on her wee conch, wi' Fergus hot on her tail-fin.

A right dance she led him, stravaigin' through the rocks an' the trailin' weed, an' she blew a bubble here an' there to keep him well informed. Deep into the ocean she led poor Fergus an' him hearin' naught but her sweet song. Once she executed a neat arabesque an' sang a delicate chain o' bubbles round his neck. He made a grab, but with no more than a minor flick o' the tail she was away, leavin' him with naught but a couple o' pearls an' a wee silvery scale attached to his thumb.

They passed a Spanish frigate sleepin' in the rocks. They took a peep through the portholes of a liner an' saw the barnacles clustered on the legs of a grand piano, an' all around the bleached bones of captains and cabin boys rocked gently on their seaweed couches.

'Twas the worried man was Fergus now, for she smiled a crafty wee smile as she caught his eye. She sang him to the mouth of a black cave where an old man fished with a great black net while he rapped on his locker with the whelks on his knuckles. His eyes were sealed wi' mother o' pearl an' sea-slugs crawled in his mossy beard.

'Twas fortunate for Fergus that he'd taken the swimmin' prize two years in succession in County Cork, for just as the net swept down he made a dive an' caught her by the tail. So surprised was she that she dropped her wee conch, which, as is well known in seafarin' circles, has a power o' magic. Fergus caught it an' 'twas the lucky man he was, for when he raised it to his lips, the note he blew was loud an' clear an' reached to Corryvarrich an' wakened Jeannie McTavish from her sleep. Down to the jetty she ran, an' her wearin' naught but her wee cutty sark, an' divil a pause till she spied him sittin' in the water wi' his wee bottle at his lips an' a starfish in his hair.

The voice of her rang clear across the water. "Fergus O'Halloran, it's ashamed o' yoursel' you should be, sittin' in the loch in the middle o' the night an' bellowin' like a bullfrog." An' she hauled him to his feet an' flicked a purple sea-anemone from behind his ear.

He shut his eyes tight an' counted from one to ten in the Gaelic, an' when he opened them she was still there—for sure she was. An' her eyes were the gold of a bumble-bee, an' her skin had niver a silvery sheen. An' she hadna a pearl at all at all—till she found one caught in his beard.

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H. E. BATES

The Quiet Girl

WHEN Maisie Foster was a child her mother sent her to one of those Edwardian villa private day schools where, for a few guineas a term, she could be sure of a kind of exclusive but wholly inadequate education that commoner children were denied. Other girls might rampage happily about the streets, spinning tops, skipping, playing hopscotch or even having fun with boys, but those things were not for Maisie. Much of the useless curriculum was undoubtedly concerned with decorum, but it is equally certain that Maisie learnt there two of the most important things in her life: sewing and the art of isolation. She was what everyone would have called a quiet girl.

At seventeen she left school and, since sewing was her chief accomplishment, went to work for a dressmaker named Miss Parsons, who had a small establishment of the customer's-own-material-made-up type behind the churchyard. The short back-street there was made up mostly of solicitors' offices in Georgian buildings with black front doors, two doctors' houses, an estate agent's, and an auctioneer's: a quiet street very much in keeping with her nature.

Halfway along the street a narrow stone-paved alleyway branched off and here Miss Parsons lived on two floors: workrooms below and modest living-quarters above. Miss Parsons was sixty, papery of appearance and short of breath; she had been warned of the dangers of stairs. Dressmakers, owing probably to the nature of their work, often tend to seem delicate, even meticulous of movement; but this was never true of Maisie.

In spite of her quietness she seemed very much like a strongly coiled spring. It seemed likely that some day something or someone would touch her and she would respond like a rampant charge of electricity. All this was belied by an undistinctive appearance: her face was soft, rather dripping-coloured and never really quite healthy in appearance; the skin seemed slightly greasy and the dark hair never quite adequately brushed up; her brown eyes had that downy appearance seen on moth wings.

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She was the sort of a girl that men are popularly supposed never to look at twice, but she belonged also to the category of women who, unblessed with good looks, nevertheless have excellent figures. She was generously formed but compact, rather large in the hips but on the whole very well-proportioned.

Five years after she had joined Miss Parsons she one day heard a short cry and a thumping sound from upstairs and ran there to find Miss Parsons face downwards on the top step, struck down by a sudden heart attack. In two days she was dead.

Maisie was now twenty-two and living with her mother and her father's sister on the far side of the town. Her father, a clerk to a firm of leather factors, had been dead ten years or more.

Presently, in her quiet way, she was going home to tell her mother, "Miss Parsons left a codicil to her will saying that if I wish I can take over the lease and the business without having to pay anything for the goodwill. I think I shall take it. It was very generous of her. It seems the opportunity of a lifetime."

Her mother agreed that it was. "Will you go there to live?" she said, "or will you carry on here with us?"

"I shall go there, I think," she said. "I'd really like to start out on my own."

Within a week she retired into the dressmaking establishment quietly and unobtrusively, as into a shell. Customers continued to bring in their own materials, to ponder over pattern books, to take fittings, and chat about the weather. The order books were nearly always full; in her quiet way she worked industriously.

One afternoon a woman of twenty-six or so, just engaged to be married, came in to ask if Maisie could perhaps find her a material of rather a special colour. It was to match the turquoise ring she was wearing—not quite the blue of a thrush's egg and not quite that of a forget-me-not. A very difficult blue, but one she had set her heart on.

In the square in front of the church there were ten or a dozen shops of the sort you always find in small country towns: a grocer's, a pork butcher's, a seed shop, a tearoom, and so on. The biggest of these, with a fairly large double front, was a draper's owned by a man named Ashley Walpole. Maisie occasionally went to the shop for odd materials, buttons, cottons, accessories, and so on.

Later that afternoon she crossed the square, went into the shop and began to describe the particular blue colour to the chief assistant, a Mrs. Fitzgerald, who went up to London once or twice a month on buying missions, often for special orders. Once again the particular shade of blue proved to be a very difficult one to define.

"It isn't exactly a thrush egg blue," Maisie was saying, "perhaps it's nearer that vitriol blue—you know, a sort of chemical blue."

As she and Mrs. Fitzgerald were discussing this, but without much success, a voice behind her said, "Some difficulty, Miss Foster? Something I can do to help?"

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It was Ashley Walpole himself: a man of forty, tallish, unspontaneous of movement, rather correct, but at the same time eager to please, a man who never missed the chance of doing business. He wore starched collars which shone like porcelain and this porcelain shininess was reflected in his pale, rather fidgety, fresh grey eyes.

" Not quite a thrush egg, as we were saying—"

" I rather think we had a roll of shantung in something of that shade," Walpole said. " A customer ordered it and then some friend or other told her the colour was unlucky. I think we might still have it. If we have it'll probably be stowed away somewhere in my office. I'll have to look it out."

Maisie thanked him and Walpole went on to say, " Are you going to be at home again this afternoon, Miss Foster? If I find it I could snip a length off and drop it in as I go out to tea. I generally go across to The Geisha for a cup about half past four."

It was nearly five o'clock before Walpole did in fact arrive and she was then astonished to see that he carried a small box of water-colour paints in his hand. The roll of shantung, he explained, was not in his office after all but in his eagerness to please, always keen to do business, he was ready to mix blues of all sorts until the right one was found.

" It's awfully good of you," Maisie said. " I'm afraid if you want water for the paints we'll have to go upstairs. Do you mind? "

Maisie's small sitting-room upstairs, with its window overlooking the churchyard, had all the embalmed silence of a cloister. It was a mild late spring afternoon and a tree of double white cherry had shed a snowstorm of petals on grass, gravestones, and path below. Looking down at it Walpole remarked to Maisie on the surprising isolation of it all. He would never have guessed how quiet she was here, how comfortable, how tucked away.

" If we can mix this colour right," he said, " I'm going to London tomorrow myself and I'll try to match it up."

As he sat at a table, mixing and then painting strips of colour on a sheet of white paper, she couldn't help noticing that his hands were of surprising thinness. The fingers were long and exploratory. They were the kind of hands pianists are popularly supposed to have and she half expected him to start playing tunes with paints and paintbrush.

" I hope you've had tea," she said. Walpole was being exceptionally studious and careful with his mixing of colours, she thought, and it was already half past five. " Because if you haven't—"

" I had to cut it, I'm afraid," he said. " I got held up by a long telephone call."

" Oh, I'll get some," she said. " I haven't had mine yet."

He thanked her with his usual eagerness that was also in some contradictory way so correct.

" Would you care for me to bring some sample buttons too if I can get them? " he said over tea.

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She said she would, very much, and after that they talked with triviality of the dressmaking trade, how fussy customers sometimes were, what stupid things they said, and how absurdly they contradicted themselves. She several times said, "Oh yes! Oh, don't they?" in delighted and surprised exclamation at some point he made.

"Of course I've seen you often in the shop," he said, "but I don't suppose I've ever really spoken to you."

"No, I suppose not, really."

"I suppose I'm always at the grindstone. I'm often at the shop by half past six in the morning and sometimes I don't leave till nine or ten at night."

"Not much time at home. What does Mrs. Walpole say to it all?"

"Oh, she reads a lot," he said. "I suppose she's sort of conditioned herself to it. After all, in business—"

He seemed, she thought, to speak of his wife with indifference, as another piece of material rolled up, put away and waiting to be used.

"I think perhaps if we concentrated on these four samples," he said, "and I could try to get something in that range—"

Some of the blues were really exquisite, she suddenly told him. They really were. She herself thought he was really very artistic.

"Oh, you think so? I did do some painting at one time. I used to do designs on fabrics, but I gave it up. The business came first."

"You should never have given it up," she said. "You have just the right sort of hands."

Soon he was packing up the paintbox, ready to go; the business called; in his eager way he was thanking her for the tea.

"It was excellent, the tea. Far better than I get at The Geisha." He laughed. "You should start a little tea place of your own."

"You're always welcome to a cup," she said. "Any day. I usually have mine about four."

After that he started to discover, almost every day, some sort of excuse to come across the square at four o'clock. Some new buttons had arrived; he had spotted, in a fashion magazine or somewhere, a new design for a collar; he had bought new, delightful silks from Italy.

In the churchyard laburnum blossom succeeded cherry; the summer began to grow hot. Walpole started to wear a light cream linen jacket, but sometimes in the humid mid afternoons he took even this off and sat sipping tea with Maisie in his shirtsleeves in the stifling little upstairs room.

One afternoon it seemed hotter than ever and she got up to draw the curtains. She didn't like drawing the curtains, she explained to Walpole; it might make people think that someone had died. Then as she reached up to draw them she turned suddenly and found him standing close to her, lips parted, fresh grey eyes more fidgety, more eager than ever.

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For some seconds she stood there transfixed in the act of drawing the curtains, one arm uplifted, her dress stretched tight across her breast. A moment later he was kissing her and with two swift sharp snaps she drew the curtains together, shutting out any possible gazer from the churchyard and the light of the hot mid-summer afternoon.

The two snaps of the curtains were the first of several signals that started to release the coiled spring inside her. At first the process was neither violent nor abrupt. It was much more like the unfolding of a flower. It didn't even show itself in thrilling outward signs, in coquettishness or laughing responses, in the customary half articulate lightheaded reactions of girls suddenly awakened. Her only visible sign of change was that she started to be a little more meticulous about her hair in the afternoons.

She had in fact suddenly become acutely conscious of her hair and one afternoon, after two or three weeks of meeting Walpole, she brushed it vigorously out and then put it up, in a sort of brown pinnacle, in an entirely different way.

When Walpole later arrived he was quick to notice the change. It made her look so much taller, he said, it seemed to lift her up. He gazed at it for some moments with a sort of compressed rapture and then in a sudden spontaneous gesture took it in both hands, slowly smoothing it upwards.

These long slow movements of his hands on her hair were the next signals in the process of awakening. A crowd of nerves at the roots of her hair, low in the neck, started to quiver like an unrestrained chorus of strings. She found it suddenly impossible to hold still and presently she and Walpole were half sitting, half lying in a chair, embracing violently, he still smoothing her hair upwards, with one hand.

" You know how to drive me mad now, don't you? " became a phrase of hers, repeated over and over again, during the next few hot weeks of summer.

By this time the spring inside her, so long coiled up, had become completely released in all its strength. She now started to shut the front door at five, giving up the meeting for tea at four, so that Walpole could slip in when the last of her customers had departed.

Throughout the hot afternoons of July she continually lay undressed on the bed upstairs, listening to, though over and over again not really hearing, a recital from Walpole on an age-old, long-familiar theme. It was not that his wife was merely cold, undemonstrative or casually unreceptive of the things he wanted to give—it was merely that he was lonely. He had been lonely for a long, long time. That was why he was often so early at business and away so late at night. That was why, cursed with loneliness, he was so glad of Maisie.

After a time, she discovered, she herself began to be bored with this theme and it was with something like relief that she heard him say, one afternoon towards the end of July, " I've got bad news. I'm going away for a couple of weeks or so. I've simply

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got to give her a holiday. We're going down to Bournemouth in the car. By God, I shall miss you."

"I shall be here when you get back," she said, calmly and quietly. "Waiting. Just the same."

But when he got back, nearly three weeks later, it was not the same.

The interval woke her fully to a disturbing, almost intolerable reality. She now discovered, and with something like despair as time went on, that the one thing she missed more than anything else was Walpole's simple ability to make her excited, almost mad. She wanted above all to feel the smooth, long hands slowly driving her to an exquisite distraction through the roots of her hair.

One of her customers about this time was a robust, middle-aged countrywoman named Miss Walker. She had a habit of wearing men's shirts with green bow ties, heavy tweed skirts, thick brogue shoes, and a sort of green Tyrolean hat. She was extremely particular about the shirts. She liked them to be handmade; she specially insisted also that they should be made from the sort of material obtainable only from men's shops.

A gentlemen's outfitters named Sampson & Marshall kept the shirting materials on which Miss Walker so meticulously insisted and late one morning she was in there, selecting several lengths for Maisie to make up. As she stood at the counter a young man in a light fawn check suit, neat brown shoes, and a light brown trilby hat came in and began to inquire about shirts made to measure.

"I'm afraid we don't do them, sir," the assistant said. "There really isn't all that call—"

Miss Walker, overhearing, said in a peremptory way that of course there was a call. Here, in fact, was a call. They were all too conservative and stereotyped in the clothing business, she announced, in the matter of shirts especially. They needed a jolly good jolt from time to time.

"Miss Foster will make them up for you. She's quite first class. She's always made shirts for me. I'm selecting some materials now."

In her robust, forthright way she went on to tell the young man that she herself was in fact going back to Miss Foster's premises immediately and if he cared to come along . . .

He thanked her and presently they were walking through the town together. It turned out that he had only just come to the town, was a cashier at a bank and had a temporary room at The George Hotel. No, he confessed to her, he didn't like the town. It was dull, it bored him, especially on Sundays. It drove you mad on Sundays.

"Do you hunt at all?" Miss Walker said.

"I'm afraid not."

"Pity. I could have introduced you to the hunting crowd."

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Half an hour later she left him alone with Maisie. His name, he told Maisie, was Robert Prentice.

When he removed his jacket so that she could measure him for the shirts it became obvious that he was quite muscular in a sinewy sort of way. The shoulders were broad and level; the waist and hips were fined down. A certain shyness of manner, though not excessive, merely emphasised the physical qualities and the thought crossed her mind that he might possibly have found it difficult to make friends.

Soon he was telling her, as he had told Miss Walker, of his boredom with the town, especially the Sunday boredom. For heaven's sake what did a man do in a town like this on Sundays? What for example did she do on Sundays?

"Me?" she said. "Well now, what do I do on Sundays?" She had finished taking his measurements and he was already putting on his jacket. "Well, I get up rather late, about half past ten, I suppose. I don't have any breakfast, just a cup of tea. Then I cook myself a really good meal—I don't have much chance to do that in the week—and sit down about two o'clock to eat it. Generally roast beef and Yorkshire."

"Sounds wonderful," he said. He interposed here a brief description of the remarkable roast beef and Yorkshire served on Sundays at The George Hotel. It was in the cat's meat class, he explained, generally tepid and smothered always in a brown congealing paste that passed as gravy. "But that's only half your day. What about the rest?"

As she went on to tell him that after lunch she invariably read the papers, had tea about five o'clock, and then in the evening had a leisurely hot bath she looked instinctively at his hands. For a well-built man they were unexpectedly small hands, far shorter than Walpole's. She was greatly surprised about this; and instinctively too, as she looked at them, she seemed already to feel them stroking the roots of her hair.

If her surprise about his hands was great, his own about Maisie was far greater. He had expected a much older woman. She was in fact of his own age and presently he found himself saying, "But don't you ever go out on Sundays?"

"Never," she said. "Where is there to go? The cinemas don't open. I hardly ever drink. And you'd hardly expect me to eat lunch at The George, would you? No, I like it here."

All this time her eyes were insidiously and consistently drawn back to his hands. For this reason she hardly ever looked him fully in the face, with the result that he somehow gained the impression that she, too, with her colourless, unprepossessing appearance, was shy.

Presently he was saying, "I hope you didn't mind my asking all that just now, but I just wondered . . ."

"Wondered what?"

"I wondered if you'd perhaps like to come out with me on Sunday?"

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Again she stood watching his hands; again she seemed to feel the touch of them on the nape of her neck.

"Where would we go?" she said. "What would we do? What could we do if it rained?"

He hardly knew, he said. Of course the situation would have been easy if he had had a car, but unfortunately a bank clerk's salary didn't run to that. As he said this he threw up his hands rather demonstratively, in a gesture of resignation that bemused her completely. A sudden unbearable web of tension spun itself round her, trapping her as if she were a fly.

"It's very nice of you to ask me," she said and the words came thickly, almost congealed, in her throat, "but I tell you what—"

"Yes?"

"If it wouldn't bore you too much you could come and share Sunday lunch with me here."

He reacted with almost pitiful delight. It was the nicest thing that had happened to him since he came to the town. She couldn't imagine how much he'd look forward to it. She couldn't have asked him a nicer thing.

He arrived soon after one o'clock the following Sunday, a thunderously warm day already humidly overcast but as yet without rain, carrying as gifts for her a box of burnt almond chocolate and a bottle of Johannisberger Riesling—perhaps not the best thing to drink with roast beef, he confessed, but the best The George could do.

"It's really more than kind of you," she said. "I hardly ever have wine."

All through lunch thunder hammered at the distances. The smell of roast beef, made richer by the oppressive quality of the air and then by the cool white wine, drifted almost voluptuously about the little upper room.

Several times during the course of the meal Maisie confessed that she was afraid of thunder. She was really a coward about thunder. Among other things she had a dreadful premonition that one day the church would be struck and the spire come tumbling down.

He was inclined to laugh at all this and when he laughed it was not merely in the gay fashion of a man completely happy but also as if released from something, set free at last from his Sabbath bondage.

Somewhere about three o'clock a single snarl of thunder seemed actually, as she had always dreaded, to bounce off the church spire. Within a second she was shouting to him to draw the curtains. He leapt up and drew them quickly, plunging the little room into almost total darkness while the rain, beginning at last, teemed torrentially outside.

For a few seconds he found himself actually having to grope his way back to his chair. He asked her if she was all right, if it was true she was really afraid, and in passing her chair put his hands, more by accident than anything, on her shoulders. They

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were trembling. In an instant her hands sprang up and grasped his own and pressed the fingers against her hair.

She spent the rest of the afternoon in his arms, in a luxurious and tempestuous trance heightened by her genuine fear of the storm. It seemed as if the rain would never stop. The air became yellow with the strangest of thunder lights. Whenever the clock on the church chimed it was on cavernous notes, echo repeating echo, uncannily oppressive and near.

It was six o'clock before the rain stopped and she could draw back the curtains. She was calmer now. The storm sailed suddenly and completely away, taking her fears with it as surely as a kite dragging its tail. The effect of the wine, which had at first made her sleepy, had worn off by this time and now she was herself again.

" I've loved it here," he said, " absolutely loved it. When am I going to see you again? "

" Next Sunday? "

" Not before? I hoped—"

" I don't think so. I really have so little time in the week." She was thinking already, not precisely in a calculating sort of way, but quite coolly, that Walpole would be back by Tuesday. " You see I'm busy all day. Then I have to get a meal and there are always accounts to do."

Choked with disappointment, he could only murmur, as Walpole had so often done, that it was all so lonely in the week, so damned lonely. Once again the words bored her and she said, " You mustn't let yourself be lonely. I'm alone here but not lonely. Think of me. I shall think of you."

" You will? "

" Of course. A lot. Yes, you can see me next Sunday. You can come to lunch again."

" Thank you. That's wonderful."

" Don't you really think it's perhaps a good thing if we don't see each other for a week? " she said. " After all you hardly know me."

" I could get to know you more if I saw you in the week."

A renewed desire to be caressed again suddenly overcame her and she put her head on his shoulder, at the same time raising one of his hands to her hair. " You'll have heaps of time to get to know me next Sunday," she said. " Sunday's always a long day."

The following week Walpole came back with distractions of his own. As if three weeks of hotel life were not enough, his wife had developed moods. With petulance she refused breakfasts, didn't get up until midday, and left him to walk by the sea alone. In the enervating southern air he drowsed away long empty days under pines, building up a brittle edifice of self-pity, telling himself that he was lonelier than ever and longing above all for a glimpse of Maisie, so unexpectedly superb in body, in the little upper room.

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As if nothing had happened in his absence she took him back into the quietness of her special seclusion as she might have picked up a dress that had been laid aside unfinished. She slipped off her clothes for him with no more compunction than if she had been taking off a hat and with hardly a thought of Robert Prentice. It was wonderful to be caressed again. It was wonderful to feel also that when both the week's ecstasy and boredom had built themselves up to be equally intolerable there would be a change of hands on Sunday.

"Did you miss me?" Walpole said. "Did anything happen while I was away?"

Of course she missed him. But nothing had happened at all.

It never once occurred to her that there might have been some sort of deceit in this. If anybody were being deceitful it was Walpole. What she did with Robert Prentice actually took place, as it seemed to her, in a world apart, a privileged, private world in which Walpole had no place.

"I've got a surprise for you," Walpole said and asked her to shut her eyes.

When she opened them again it was to find herself holding a necklace of amethysts, particularly dark ones of burning violet, set in gold.

"Oh, I've never had jewellery. Never really before. I couldn't afford it. I always said I'd never have any if I couldn't afford the best."

Later that afternoon Walpole found himself in stunned contemplation of the most extraordinary vision he had ever seen in his life: that of Maisie lying full length on the bed, wearing nothing but the amethysts. This one glowing piece of decoration had the effect of even making her unprepossessing face, with its colourless, tepid skin, seem celestially ravishing, so that he actually went down on his knees to her, hopelessly, almost prayerfully entranced.

The effect on him of incidents of this kind, however, did more than merely entrance him. He began to speak of divorce. He announced that he would go to his wife, tell everything, and beg for release from her. He would marry Maisie, bejewel her, make her a partner in the business, set her up on a plane of such delight that she would realise, he assured her, that life had really only just begun.

Maisie was silently horrified. She shrank from divorce and all its distasteful associations as from something leprosaic. She wanted no part of the complications of courts, lawyers, or even businesses. To be caressed, in isolation, was enough. It gave her refined excitements; it left her free of obligations.

"You must think carefully before you take a step like that," she said to Walpole. "It's something you might regret for ever."

"Are you trying to say that you wouldn't marry me if I got the divorce?"

"I'm saying it's something I'd have to think about."

"You mean you don't love me?"

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"I've never said I loved you. I like being with you. I like all the things we do together. Otherwise I wouldn't do them. But love—I don't know about that."

Her apparent calmness in the face of a situation Walpole regarded as both complex and critical made his own confusions infinitely worse. Beyond confusion he could see, he thought, new and impossible wastes of loneliness; beyond loneliness only intolerable despair.

He started not to be able to sleep at nights; he wandered about the house, playing interminable games of patience, drinking whisky until the small hours. At business he presented the crumpled appearance of a blind that had been badly rolled up and as badly unrolled again. Creased and slack, he groped at the simplest of problems and accepted defeat with the limpness of a man half sick. In the eventual and necessary act of pulling himself together he went about barking, hostile as an ill-tempered dog.

When he begged Maisie to let him come to see her more often and even suggested Sunday as a new field in which they could be alone together he took her refusal as meaning another withdrawal of affection. Compassionately she begged him not to be silly, to take life easy, to live for the day; but in renewed moods of self-pity he could only feel that salt was being rubbed into the open sores of his soul.

"But why not Sunday? It would be simple. All day together."

"Because Sunday is my day. I share it with myself."

The fact that she always shared most of it with Robert Prentice never struck her as being a fresh deceit or as being a source of danger, perhaps even a source of complexities so potentially twisted that they might perhaps grow tragic. She was free; she could please herself who she spent her days and nights with. As quiet as ever, she even drew satisfaction from lying awake at night, imagining first that Walpole was making love to her, then that Prentice was the one beside her in the bed. It was nice to compare their idiosyncrasies, their differing ways of expressing affection: Walpole cooler, slower, older, but skilled in the final, passionate act of satisfaction; Prentice spirited and quick, warm and excited even to the extent, sometimes, of being lyrical.

Robert Prentice begged too to see her more often. Couldn't he come in during the evenings sometimes? He finished pretty early these days at the bank; the evenings were awfully long and deadly.

Her answer was almost word for word the one she always gave to Walpole.

"The evenings are my own. I share them with myself. After all I have a long hard day."

He too took it to mean, as he felt it only could mean, a rejection of love. He too started brooding. There was an actual ache in his heart, stone-like, as he went on long walks, wretchedly beating out the oppressive minutes till Sunday. She in turn begged him, as she had begged Walpole, to take their friendship as nothing

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more than friendship, to enjoy her company like a glass of wine.

"Let's just get a little intoxicated, then sleep it off and start all over again."

It was impossible for his brooding soul to make sense of advice of that kind and one Sunday it seemed to her that, if driven much further into himself, he might actually start weeping. She tried to counteract this boring possibility by making him drink another glass or two of wine and then, when that didn't work, had a better idea.

She excused herself, saying she wanted to powder her nose, and went into her bedroom. After five minutes she called him, saying she had something to show him, a surprise, and would he come in?

A few moments later he was staring down at the same vision that had so shatteringly distracted Walpole: that of Maisie lying full length on the bed, naked except for Walpole's necklace of glowing purple fire.

As he saw her he did not bow down, as Walpole had done, with prayerful entrancement. He simply laughed with an amazed joy. "I thought that might cheer you up," she said and she laughed too. It seemed a nice sort of joke to her.

And then, two or three weeks later, something else of unexpected importance happened. She met a third and far more interesting man.

Breezily and busily he stepped into her life on a warm morning in late September: a traveller in electric sewing-machines named Archie Bishop.

"You want the best sewing-machines? I got 'em. You want service? I give. You want to pay by instalment? I got the longest instalment plan since Delilah cut off Samson's hair."

Quick as an eel, Archie Bishop never allowed his body a single breath in which to be still. His hands were semaphoric flags, flashing messages everywhere. His small brown eyes popped about in the volatile fashion of knobs of popcorn dancing up and down in a patent street-corner cooker. His neat golden moustache sparked with points of gingery fire.

"Now, Miss Foster, we have three models. There's the Olympus, the new de luxe. Then there's the Diana—bigger and better than Dors! And the Sheraton—the super-duper, out-and-outer. It does everything but make the tea."

"But I—"

"You'll do twice as much work in half the time and have bags of time left for having fun you never thought you could afford even if you'd got the time which you never had. Now where could I do a demonstration?"

"Listen," Maisie said. "I do not want an electric sewing-machine."

"You mean you think you don't want one." A spontaneous, hypocritically friendly laugh, about the twentieth of the morning,

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split the air. "There's nothing so think but meaning makes it so."

"Also, if you don't mind," Maisie said, "I don't happen to have electricity."

"We'll put it in!" Archie Bishop said. "I'll halve my commission and pay for it myself!" He permitted himself the luxury of an abrupt, stunned laugh. "You haven't what? Madam, in this day and age! *You have not got electricity?* Shades of Benjamin Franklin. I grow faint, Miss Foster. I fail—"

"I manage perfectly well with gas," Maisie said. "It suits me perfectly—"

"So you're cooking with gas, now?" he said, in mock American accents. "Great. Why not charcoal burners?"

"Look, I'm awfully sorry, but I'm very very busy—"

"Busy? We're all busy. Those who aren't busy are dead." His hands made sharp concessionary contortions in the air. "Very well. As you wish. My time is yours. I can come back whenever you say. After lunch. After tea. Tomorrow. Next week. Christmas Eve, Good Friday—"

"I'm sorry, I don't want the machine. I don't want a demonstration. I don't want anything. Besides, it's lunchtime."

"Have lunch with me!"

"No thanks. I close for the lunch hour. I have to get my own."

"I can cook. I make omelettes. They look like leather. Chamois leather." Another laugh, infectious this time, actually caused Maisie to forget herself and break into a brief spontaneous giggle. He was quick to seize on this unexpected gesture of friendliness and said, "I must say I like the dress. I like the little itsy-bitsy, forget-me-notty, little-bit-of-spotty, polka-dot—"

Maisie was wearing a neat sleeveless dress of white linen covered in pale blue polka dots. The day was warm for late September, but in the dress she looked quiet, composed, and cool.

"Make it yourself?"

"I did."

"You don't need an electric sewing-machine, Miss Foster," he said with sudden mock seriousness. "You have an angelic needle, dear lady. Quite an angelic needle. Bishop, you clueless moron, what in the name of holy silkworms are you up to?"

"For goodness' sake, go and have your lunch," Maisie said. "Do."

"Splendid thought! But I'll be back." He laughed, took out a diary stuffed with dates, notes, addresses, and figures, flipped over its leaves and said, "Now let's see. I've got two aged widows to rob at half past two. A blind spinster at three o'clock and—how about five o'clock?"

Five o'clock, Walpole's hour, was utterly out of the question, and for a second Maisie broke out of her customary quietness with a real bark of vexation, "Now for goodness' sake get out, will you? I've had all I can stand. You're enough to drive a saint up the wall. For the last time I am very very busy. I've got an order for a

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wedding to finish and I'll probably be working till midnight—"

"Ravishing thought."

"Please. Do you mind?"

"Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry."

Suddenly, without argument or another quip or protest, Archie Bishop was gone.

Maisie immediately locked her door, went upstairs, and set about boiling herself an egg and making a cup of tea for lunch. Then suddenly she began to feel ashamed of herself for having lost her temper. She felt rather as if she had unjustly scolded a small boy for having played a practical joke on her.

She ate her lunch moodily. She felt she would have given a good deal to retract the words hurled in temper at Archie Bishop. It was all very small and undignified and as the afternoon went on the incident started to haunt her.

"Oh well, he deserved it. It *was* enough to make you boil. It's nothing to fuss about now. People like that get what they deserve."

But when Walpole dropped in, as always, about five o'clock, she was still moody, still distracted by self-reproaches.

"No, you really can't come upstairs today. I haven't even time to stop for tea."

"But why?"

"There simply isn't the time, that's why. I've got this wedding order to finish and it has to be done. It has to be right."

"You seem short-tempered today."

"Perhaps I am, perhaps I am."

"Is it my fault?"

"I never said it was, but if you like to think so, if you like to think so."

The immediate effect of the incident was to drive Walpole further into himself. He withdrew into darker realms of self-pity. He started a parade of anguished suspicions about her. There was another man; he was sure of it; she had another lover.

The effect on her was precisely the opposite. She felt increasingly self-critical. She worked on the wedding order restlessly, her mind continually snapping at itself. She even began to feel rebellious, for the first time in her life, against seclusion. She wanted to drop everything, rush out, and get away somewhere.

As evening came on she locked the front door and went on working, striving hard to get the wedding order done. About seven o'clock rain started to fall, bringing down the first big papery chestnut leaves in the churchyard. The sound of rain and leaves, in some way ghostly, did nothing to subdue her restlessness and presently she found herself listening for another sound, that of a knock on the door, of Archie Bishop coming back.

She finished the wedding order about half past eleven, then made herself some coffee and took it to bed with her.

"I make omelettes. They look like leather. Chamois leather. I've got two aged widows to rob at half past two. You have an angelic needle, dear lady. An angelic needle. What in the name

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of holy silkworms? There's nothing so think but meaning makes it so."

She lay awake for a long time, not thinking so much as working a treadmill of words. Stupid, gay, bright idiotic phrases surrounded in prancing dances, never letting her rest. Little forces, inspired by little gestures, looks and bursts of laughter, marched in on her throughout the night.

Six months before, she would have laughed at herself at the notion of having electricity installed simply because a stranger had slightly mocked her about it; but within a week of that slightly crazy and inconclusive morning meeting with Archie Bishop workmen were in the house, fitting the cables.

In the installation of electricity she found another excuse to put first Walpole and then Robert Prentice a little farther away from her.

"The house is an absolute pigsty. No, you really can't come in. There isn't anywhere to sit down even. The bedroom is piled with clutter and you can't turn round. And you know how workmen are—they'll be ages and ages."

The two men, pushed out, brooded in their separate backwaters. The vision of Maisie on the bed, amethyst-clothed, persisted for each of them like a nightmare.

In turn she had almost succeeded in putting Archie Bishop out of her mind when suddenly, on a morning in October fresh with a touch of frost, she heard a muted whistle at the front door and a voice saying, "Digging for buried treasure? Ducats or diamonds? Wouldn't Benjamin be pleased?"

Archie Bishop, in a new herringbone pattern overcoat of smart light grey, came breezily into Maisie's workshop as if life had spurned him in no single instant or particular since she had seen him last. He seemed, if anything, smarter, brighter, more inconsequential than ever.

"More wedding orders today?"

"Not today."

"Ah then, possibly we might have the little tête-à-tête?"

"I still don't want the electric sewing-machine if that's what you're trying to say."

The first engaging, effervescent laugh of the morning bubbled about the air.

"I no longer sell electric sewing-machines, dear lady. It proved to be très, très difficile. It came to pass that I actually found some people who hadn't got electricity. Not playing the game. Very awkward."

Her normally pallid face suddenly flushed darkly. Neither Walpole nor Robert Prentice had ever said a single word, in sarcasm or fun, to hurt her; in devotion both were blameless. But suddenly the mischief in Archie Bishop's words went through her like a twisting needle. There were almost tears in her eyes.

"No. Refrigerators now. Every man's icebox. Own your

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own igloo. Ever go to the flicks? Saw a film about Eskimos the other day. Simple chaps. I believe you could sell them a refrigerator at that."

"*You* could." Her voice, if not quite bitter, carried sarcastic undertones that were not lost on him. "You could sell anybody anything."

"Now that," Archie Bishop said, again with the friendliest of laughs, "is what is known as coming the old acid."

"Whatever that may mean."

"You know what I always say—there's nothing so mean but thinking makes it so."

"I thought," she said, "it was the other way round?"

"Revised version," he said in the briskest of voices. "Winter season. All jokes now kept in the deep freeze. Now what about the fridge? Not until you've had one will you realise what pineapple and ice can do when you put them into a marriage bed of cream—"

Whereas, a moment or two before, she had been on the verge of tears she now found herself giving another rather foolish, spontaneous giggle.

"I suppose you talk to everyone like this?" she said. "Even the aged widows?"

"Given up robbing aged widows," he said. "I concentrate solely on young ones now. And married women."

"How nice," she said. "That lets me out."

"The loss is mine."

"And what will you do," Maisie said, "when you can't sell any more refrigerators?"

"I propose," he said, "to sell concrete mixers to Socialist conferences."

"Yes?" she said. "How will that help?"

"Oh, very much," he said. "Everybody will be able to mix his own concrete conclusions. In seven separate flavours."

She laughed again. A sudden strange lightheartedness, of a kind she had never experienced before, ripped quickly through her, leaving her feeling inconsequential too. She had never in her life heard anyone talk as Archie Bishop talked. Every quip, each piece of nonsense thrown off as a conjurer throws off an act, found her unready.

Upstairs a workman started hammering and outside, across the churchyard, the clock chimed half past twelve. The two events made Archie Bishop lift his head smartly, rather like a handsome cockerel, and say that it was time for a snifter and wouldn't Maisie nip out and join him in one somewhere?

"Oh, I don't drink much, thank you. And certainly not in the middle of a working day. Goodness, I'd go to sleep all afternoon."

And what, Archie Bishop wanted to know, was wrong with that?

"Nothing, I suppose. Only—"

"Only what? Me—I always sleep all afternoon. Often. Have

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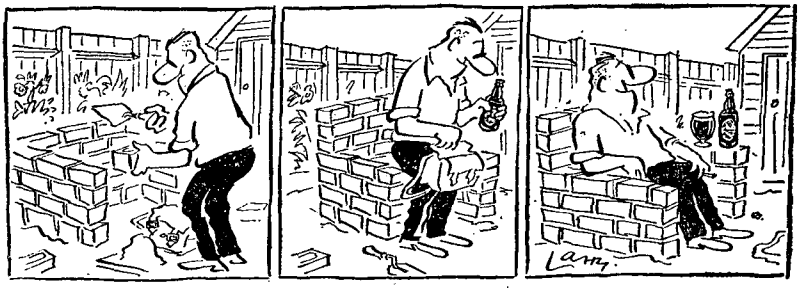

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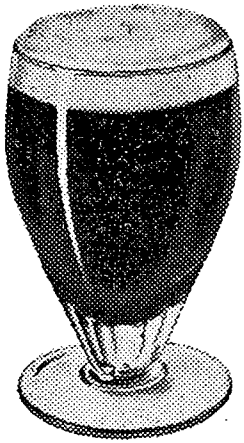

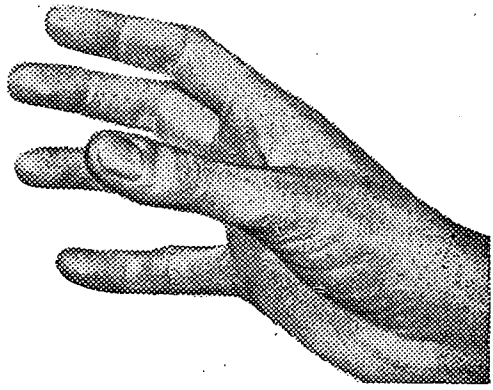

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half a dozen drinks and a good lunch and then go and lie down in a hayfield somewhere."

"You're not serious. Don't you have to work?"

"Work? What's work? The man who invented it should have been choked with his dummy tit. Come on, let's go and have one."

All that had happened to her in life, everything of excitement or importance, had hitherto happened in seclusion. In the isolation of the little house she had discovered, by the purest chance, what revolution a simple caress from Walpole could begin; it had been fun to repeat it with Prentice. Now it was exactly as if Archie Bishop had opened a door; at any moment, she felt, the facade of seclusion would start crumbling and melting away.

"Come on, I'll give you lunch. We'll have a couple of snifters and then lunch. And then we'll take a boat out on the river for the afternoon."

"I never heard of anything so absurd."

"No? Just shows you haven't known Archie from Karachi very long." He mocked her gaily, now in the accents of an Eastern gentleman. "I sell you big fine carpet?"

"You came to sell me a fridge and here we are boating—"

"Oh, blow the fridge."

"I was going to say I'd probably buy one."

"Haven't the heart to take the money, lady. Well, not today, anyway. By the way, what's your other name?"

"Maisie."

"Maisie, Maisie, give me your answer, do. Will you have lunch with me and boat at half past two?"

"No, thank you," she said. "My lunch is all prepared and I've got to work this afternoon."

Soon he again breezed lightheartedly away, leaving her to her solitary lunch upstairs. Since the electricians were still busy in the sitting-room she ate her meal of cold ham and salad in the bedroom. Across the churchyard the October afternoon glowed like a golden fruit; in the square the chestnuts burnt richly in the sun. She had never before felt lonely in isolation; now she began to feel inexplicably, uncannily restless. She felt herself struggling against seclusion as a chrysalis struggles to free itself after winter.

At three o'clock Archie Bishop breezed back again, refreshed with four double gins, a lunch of chicken pie, and chocolate ice-cream, and two cold beers. By no means drunk, he surveyed her on the contrary with an air almost sober, apologetically.

"Played the fool a bit this morning. Of course I've got to work. As a matter of fact I've got to go over to see a man at Abingford. Wondered if you'd care to come for the drive? Serious, this time. Glorious afternoon."

All afternoon she had dreaded the arrival of Walpole; with something like dismay she had looked forward to the five o'clock visit, the fretting frustrations, the soul-searchings.

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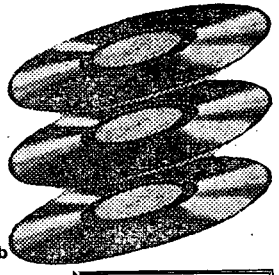

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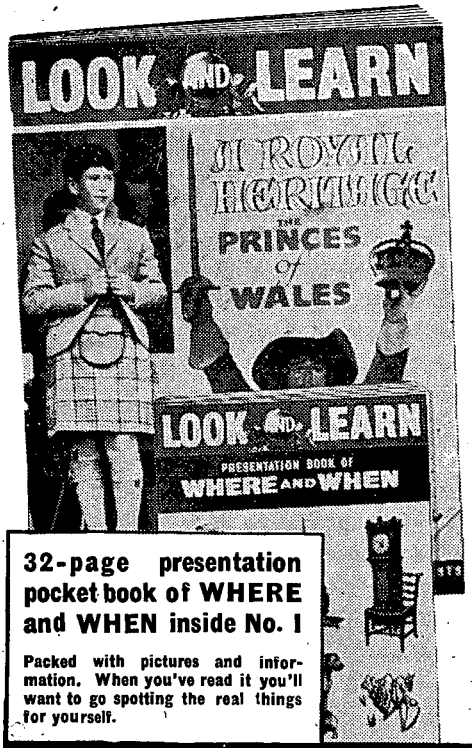

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" I'd love to come," she said.

He drove his car slowly. The sky was like a thin azure globe. Empty wheatfields caught the clear sunlight and lay like silky yellow squares against greenest patterns of meadowland. In the immense embalming peace of October the colouring trees hardly stirred.

After four or five miles he stopped the car at the crest of the river valley. Down below, the river wound clear blue through wide meadows where red and white cattle grazed not unlike crowds of quiet ladybirds. " Peaceful," he said. " Could sleep."

" Me too."

For ten minutes or more he slept quite soundlessly. At first she shut her eyes too, but soon she felt restless and opened them. The chrysalis was stirring again and she sat staring in contemplation first at the valley below and then at Archie Bishop, no longer the clowning cockerel of the morning but a man sunk into an amazing trance of tranquillity.

When he opened his eyes it was to find her still staring into his face. " That's a nice sight to wake up to," he said, and turned slowly, kissing her fully and quickly on the mouth.

" Just for luck," he said, with the merest touch of former lightness. " A free gift."

" Why luck? "

" Everybody needs a little now and then."

" You treat all the girls like this? Don't tell me you don't, because you do."

" Those who know should never ask," he said. " Yes: absolutely right. Come one, come all. Married or single. Young or old. Same treatment."

" It's comforting for all of us to know where we stand."

" Of course. I'm a fair-minded man."

" Do you suppose," she said, " there'll ever be one who'll be luckier than the rest? "

" ' *I doubt it,' said the Carpenter, and shed a bitter tear.*"

He grinned and then soberly, and for a little longer this time, kissed her a second time. To her astonishment the kiss had on her much the same effect as the embalming October afternoon. It seemed to seal all her emotions somewhere down in the deep core of herself, filling her with a profound and unexpected satisfaction.

She felt, in her amazement, that she had to say something about this, and after staring down for some time at the meadows she said, " It was a big surprise, kissing you. I didn't think it would be like that with you."

" Ah. The lady tactfully expresses disappointment."

" No," she said. " I just didn't think it would be like that, that's all."

" Not quite enough zip? " he said. She could feel the quips feeding themselves into his mouth, like bullets into a gun. " Of course I have other techniques."

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Quietly she turned and took his face into her two hands, holding it there for fully half a minute before speaking.

" It was very moving," she said.

That evening, alone, she sat down and wrote two letters, in reality the same letter: one to Walpole and the other to Robert Prentice.

It must have been obvious to you for some time that this couldn't go on. It isn't that I'm not fond of you. It isn't that at all. It's simply that the longer we go on the worse the complications will be. It simply wouldn't be fair to you if I let you go on thinking that I loved you or that I might perhaps love you in time. I know now that I never have—please will you try very hard to forgive me this?—and that I'm sure I never will.

After she had been out to post the letters she went back to her room and sat for some time looking out of her window at the clear night sky. An autumnal planet of great splendour, setting with a ripe glow in the west, seemed to reflect in the calmest distillation all the peace of the golden afternoon.

As she sat there she started to think of Archie Bishop: not so much of the clowning cockerel with the facile quips, the carelessness and the quick magical banter as of the few serious moments in the car, apparently on the surface lighthearted too, when she had finally confessed to him, " I'll count all the minutes till you come back. I will, really. Don't be more than a week if you can help it, please. Promise me? "

With the lightest of promises Archie Bishop declared his earnest intention of being back in no time at all. The bad penny, he reminded her, the bad penny.

Again, and for almost a minute, she held his face in her hands. The chrysalis was moving now in its final tortuous struggles to be free and as she kissed him again she was so oblivious of everything outside her that she didn't even bother to lift his hands to her hair. That easy, simple, electrifying gesture was necessary no longer.

" I've never been kissed like that before," she said. " I never knew it was such a serious thing."

Neither Walpole nor Robert Prentice showed even a little willingness to forgive.

After three tortured and intolerable days Robert Prentice borrowed a .22 shotgun from the landlord of The George Hotel and, on the pretext of wanting to shoot rabbits, walked down to the river one evening and blew out his brains on the small jetty where townspeople hired boats and punts and did a little sailing at weekends.

With demented forethought he left a letter for the manager of his bank, expressing sorrow for all he had done, and another to the coroner. In his note to the bank manager, a brief one, he wrote:

It can't be possible that God had to send me to this town just to meet a woman like Maisie Foster. It just can't be possible. There must be some other sort of mercy I might have been granted.

With some indiscretion the bank manager, greatly upset,

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showed the letter to his wife who, under promise of silence, instantly spoke of it to her sister.

When rumour started to poison the town Robert Walpole went about in solitary horror, trying to nurse a mind broken to near craziness by hideous jealousies. He savagely conceived that he knew, now, why Maisie had written to him, why the amethyst afternoons were now all over. But if he bitterly hated the young man who had been stupid and unstable enough to make an unholy mess of himself at the boating jetty it was no more than mere petulance compared with the thoughts, revengeful to a point of black ghoulishness, that began to obsess him about Maisie.

It was now not merely a question of not being able to sleep at nights. He tramped endlessly about the town, carrying an ancient umbrella that he had hastily snatched up either as if for a source of comfort or as a weapon. With this he made wild stupefied threats at the night sky and sometimes the umbrella came violently undone, flapping like a terrified mad bat with broken wings.

Presently the local station sergeant thought it prudent to warn patrolling night constables of the possibility of running into that raving lunatic, Ashley Walpole, " who gets savage with the moon. They say he drinks them dry at the Liberal Club every night. He hit a steward with an umbrella the other evening and had to be carted out."

In final frenzy, late one night towards the end of November, Walpole half ran, half rolled to Maisie's door and struck it several blows with the handle of the umbrella, a panting constable following him half a street away on heavy steps.

Maisie, who had not been able to sleep well for some weeks either, was lying in a trance of recollection about Archie Bishop when the knocks came.

She had waited a long time for Bishop. With an actual ache in her heart, much as Walpole had done, she had brooded alone and for a long time on small things. The little forces made up of looks, gestures, quips, and finally a few revelatory sober kisses had become magnified until they too were like great dark bats, haunting her.

She came out of the trance in a start of great excitement, telling herself that only that joker Archie could be knocking on her door in that way and so late.

She hastily slipped into a dressing-gown and rushed downstairs, only to open the door to a raging frenzy from Walpole, who started to batter her savagely about the face with the big bat-like umbrella, shouting, " I'll kill you! I'll murder you. I'll kill you so help me! "

The threat of murder is a serious matter, more especially when made within the hearing of a policeman, and at Walpole's trial the judge was at great pains to point out to the jury that the court was a court of law, not of morals. Whether or not a woman had been the lover of one man or even two was irrelevant; it was a shocking and wicked thing for her to be confronted, at the door of

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her own house, in the dead of night, totally unprepared and defenceless, by a visitor whose palpable intention it was to kill. A woman had a perfect right to choose or reject her friends, or even her lovers, as and when she wished, and however painful such rejection might be to the rejected it could never in any circumstances be an excuse for taking the law into his own hands.

It was fortunate indeed that a police officer had been in earshot that night, otherwise they might have now been listening to a graver charge. It was fortunate also that the prisoner had previously been a man of excellent, in fact exemplary character, otherwise the sentence might have been far longer than the two years he now imposed.

A shattered Walpole, in stricken silence, listened without hearing a word. He stared into spaces beyond the courtroom with a peculiar, penetrative concentration, eyes half closed, as if searching for a tiny and barely perceptible object in the far distances: a scrap of colour, a turquoise button or even perhaps an amethyst.

As the winter dusks began to close in earlier and earlier, Maisie fell once again into her old habit of isolation. She kept herself to herself; she was busy with her needle; she hardly went out at all. She waited quietly, steadfastly even with a sort of patience, for Archie Bishop, for ever listening to the echo of voices.

"There's nothing so think but meaning makes it so," was one of the many silly inconsequential phrases that all through the long winter roamed hauntingly about her mind, together with another, "You have an angelic needle, dear lady. Quite an angelic needle."

And still a third, putting its constant nagging question into the quietness of the little house: "Do you suppose there'll ever be one luckier than the rest?" and its great dark bat of an answer: "'*I doubt it,' said the Carpenter, and shed a bitter tear.*"

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★ ***Gay exciting new novel by Paul Gallico begins in ARGOSY, on sale February 9***

SOLUTIONS to HERE'S HOW on page 104

1. *i. a South American monkey—or, of course, a ridiculous blunder; ii. poetic owl; iii. elephant's top rigging; iv. short gun for high-angle firing of shells at low velocities.*
2. *W. S. Gilbert's The Mikado.*
3. *i. George Mikes; ii. Richard Llewellyn; iii. Charles Kingsley; iv. E. M. Forster.*
4. *i. two; ii. ten; iii. three score and ten.*
5. *Anywhere between five and eight tons.*
6. *Rudyard Kipling.*
7. *Cricket (as if you didn't know).*

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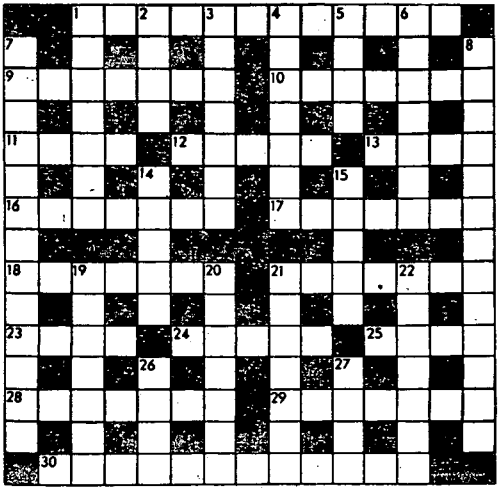
Solution on page 55



ACROSS

1 He's in the swim (3, 9).

9 Fair share (7).

10 Cattle enclosure, preferably not a china shop (4, 3).

11 Very dry start of a riddle (4).

12 Nip a small quantity (5).

13 Goes before a ling (4).

16 Monstrosity looks at rock (7).

17 Early gardener gets insect—it's hard ! (7).

18 Wildely important to be this (7).

21 Sky blue Marie (7).

23 One of six on a cube (4).

24 Almost a friend—but quite the reverse (5).

25 Only the brave deserve them (4).

28 Truth to nature is a French lily wrapped in lots of paper (7).

29 'Tis clipp'd, f'rinstance (7).

30 Clock gets the needle (6, 2, 4).

DOWN

1 Ruth was one (7).

2 School turned upside-down for a short letter (4).

3 Ghoul has a shock inside (7).

4 Unseen mistress of Manderley (7).

5 Tinned sardine surroundings (4).

6 I parcel the copy (7).

7 No dance for cool cats (6, 7).

8 Medieval travellers, wandering about after sunset ? (7-6).

14 The little princes were here (5).

15 Amuse oneself with a friend, following a penny (5).

19 New copy of Communist pontoon (7).

20 Disaster was the other impostor, according to Kipling (7).

21 Can teenagers eat here ? (7).

22 She took the Biscuit (7).

26 Old will—but no testament (4).

27 Double note opera girl (4).

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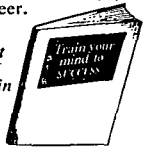

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